The Great Fair

HORSE DEALING AT BALLINASLOE

Mark Holdstock

The GREAT FAIR

53 Tuaim
km TUAM
12 Áth Eascrach
AHASCRAGH
Áth Cliath
DUBLIN 152
B. Átha Luain km
ATHLONE 24
S
BALLINASLOE
FAIR & FESTIVAL
SUNDAY 4TH OCT TO SUNDAY 11TH OC
Cead Mile Fáilte

The GREAT FAIR

Horse Dealing at Ballinasloe

MARK HOLDSTOCK
Photographs by Dublin in Depth

SOUVENIR PRESS

for Jane

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Contents

Acknowledgements 6
1 Ireland's Great Passion 7
2 The Ford on the Road to the High King 18
3 The October Fair 36
4 The Farmers' Horses 58
5 The Travelling People 79
6 The Travellers' Horses 93
7 The Followers of the Fair 118
8 Smoke and Strong Whiskey 128
9 Beyond Ballinasloe 139

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M.H.

CHAPTER ONE

Ireland's Great Passion

This is the story of a love affair. It is the story of Ireland's passion for the horse, the story of how one animal is loved above all others here, and about a small town in County Galway that bursts into life once a year with horses of every colour, shape and size, along with the people to match.

The horse is both a friend and a worker: we ride horses, jump them or perhaps just buy them to look at. They are status symbols, a means of transport and at the same time a commodity to be dealt and bred and owned. It may be a sign of the importance of horses in Ireland that the twenty pence coin should feature a horse on one side of it. The love affair goes back centuries.

Perhaps it is something in the nature of the country which makes this relationship so special. The warm winds blow in from the Gulf Stream and the rains make the land fertile, but it is also a country that has been invaded and conquered and ruled by outsiders since time began. For centuries the horse has been a means of power as well as a vital tool on the land; man used it to master his fellow men as well as to master the soil . . . or not as the case might be. It pulled the ploughshares, and gave transport in battle to the swords from which they were beaten.

Horses probably first came to Ireland thousands of years ago, before the land became an island. Ten thousand years ago, during the last ice age, there was a land bridge between the northern part of Derry and the south-west of Scotland, and at the same time the south of England was linked to the north of France by another land bridge. A horse could have walked all the way from Asia to the Atlantic coast of Ireland and it is likely that this was how the first horses reached this country. They would have come initially from Asia, where most of the world's horses originated. Those early horses bore little relationship to modern breeds: they would have

been small ponies, looking more like donkeys, and may well have had thinner, more pointed faces than the horses of today, and striped markings.

The first signs of any concrete evidence of the use by man of the horse in Ireland is at Newgrange, the ancient burial site in County Meath. The remains here date back to about 2000 BC and show that horses were probably kept in settlements at this time. Remains of early horses have also been found at Lough Gur in County Limerick.

It is quite likely that these early ponies, known as 'Breakers', would have been eaten rather than worked, and their skins would have been used to make clothing. They would have been very basic animals, small and closer in appearance to the few wild Asian horses that still survive today. Like the humans, they would not have been anywhere near the size of their modern counterparts—only about 12 hands high as compared with 16 to 17.2 for a modern horse. For the next few centuries the Irish would have reared these little ponies in much the same way that they reared sheep and cattle. In other words, the horses would have been left to get on with it, largely free from man's interference. It was only later, as the Irish started to trade with other nations and sea travel became more advanced, that other influences started to creep into the horse, and the development of Ireland as a nation of horse 'breeders' began.

In the seventh or eighth century AD Welsh Mountain ponies were brought across by traders travelling the Irish Sea. These ponies would have been bred with the existing 'Breaker' horses and the new blood from the Welsh Mountain ponies would have strengthened the existing breeds. It is likely that the Connemara ponies, which have survived to this day, began to take shape in this period.

It was not only Ireland that suddenly found new breeds coming in to strengthen its stock. In 1066 the Normans invaded England, bringing with them strong and powerful 'riding' horses. Despite their strength they were not particularly fast and were known as Norman 'Great Horses'. Unlike the small native ponies, they were large-boned and sturdy, and what is known as 'cold-blooded'. One of the signs of a cold-blooded horse is that it has large amounts of hair around the hooves. Breeds such as the present-day Clydesdale and Shire fall into this category.

Excavations at Newgrange where the first traces of domestic horses in Ireland were found. Courtesy The Office of Public Works

In time the Normans also turned their attention to Ireland, and their horses were brought across the Irish Sea when they invaded in 1169. They were one of many peoples who have come to conquer Ireland over the ages. Traders and conquerors alike brought their horses with them, often breeding their horses with those to be found in Ireland. This has had its disadvantages as well as advantages: the new horses brought fresh blood to the existing breeds, but they also took away some of the purity.

Along with their horses the Normans also brought a new way of riding: for the first time stirrups were used to help support the rider

on the back of the horse. This gave far more stability, and staying power in battle, and the Normans had used this to great advantage in their invasions of England and subsequently Ireland.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the introduction of these new large horses into the country was the creation of a new breed, the Irish Draught. This came about by breeding the large and swift Norman horses with one of the native breeds, the 'Hobby'. The result was a hefty workhorse which has become the envy of the world, a horse which is tough but agile, intelligent but well-mannered, and which

An Irish Draught mare. 'Ireland's Horse'.

has proved its worth both on the battlefield and in the showground.

The Draught is a farm horse, a sturdy beast that can handle anything which is thrown at it. It has the same heavy feel to it that a Shire, a Clydesdale or a Suffolk Punch would have, but it is not nearly as big. Shires and Suffolk Punches are roughly the same height, but they have far more bulk than the Irish Draught. Because it is not as heavy as its English cousins the Irish Draught is better for the sort of farming for which it was used in Ireland in the last century. It had to cope with very heavy ground, and despite the fact that it was a strong horse it did not sink down or churn up the soil too much. It was also an ideal breed for the size of farm which was common at that time: a ten-acre farm was considered ample, for most of the farmers were just farming at subsistence level and needed very little land to do that. It was only in the far south of Ireland around Cork and Kilkenny, in an area known as 'The Golden Vale', that the farms were more than a 100 acres. The Draught was also a military horse until this century when the tank took over from the cavalry. Its main use these days is for showjumping or for hunting. It is still quite rare to find one that is completely pure and far more likely that it will be crossed with a thoroughbred.

Ideally an Irish Draught should have a good bone structure—sturdiness is prized above all. It was said by the men in the farming communities that the Irish Draught should have the same sort of qualities as a farmer's wife—a sturdy bone structure, a large back end and a docile nature. It is not a large horse, but it is solid, with good strong bones and plenty of muscle packed into it. A good Irish Draught should have an 'alert look' about it. Although they come in many colours, they are often grey and there is a feeling that the best Irish Draughts are the greys.

The Connemara pony is the oldest 'pure' Irish breed of horse. These medium-sized ponies live in the Connemara Hills in the north-west of Galway. They are usually about 13 hands high and can trace their roots back to the native ponies with some blood from Spanish horses brought into the country by the merchants of Galway in the seventeenth century. Galway was a major trading port at this time and it would have been natural for these merchants to trade in horses. The horses which would have been brought to Ireland to strengthen the Connemaras were Spanish Barbs and Andalusian

horses. They gave the Connemaras even more strength without destroying their character. More recently Arab Thoroughbred horses have been crossed with the Connemara.

The Connemara ponies live and thrive on the heather-clad hills of Galway, living off the heather as there is so little grass. Now they are a tourist attraction, and are used to pull cartloads of visitors around the picture postcard west, but once they were used on farms and in the peat bogs because, like the Irish Draught, they are very tough for their size. Also like the Irish Draught, it is particularly common for the Connemara to be grey. A good example would have a particularly alert face and a long bushy mane on the top of the neck. These days they are often bought for children to ride and jump with at gymkhanas. Because of their place in the history of Ireland the government provides help to encourage their breeding—there's a grant of £500 for every pure Connemara foal born.

Both the Irish Draught horse and the Connemara ponies have been under threat at one time or another. In the years between the wars, when the need for horses on the land decreased, there were fears that the Irish Draught might go into decline and a society was formed to promote them. A stock book was also started up so that a record could be kept of the breed. Because of this sort of action both the Irish Draught and the Connemara pony have thrived in recent years and they are now fairly common all over the country.

* * *

Historical evidence suggests that the earliest use of the horse as a means of transport was to haul either carts or chariots—they weren't ridden. Not surprisingly, horses figure very strongly in Gaelic legend. There was the great Celtic warrior Cuchulainn, who rode a chariot pulled by two horses that were alike in size, beauty, fierceness and speed. The right-hand horse was said to be grey, broad in the haunches, fierce, swift and wild, while the other was jet black, his head firmly knit, his feet broad-hoofed and slender. According to the legend this was the one chariot which the best horses of Ulster could not catch, on account of the 'swiftness and speed' of the chariot and the chariot chief who drove it.

Speed still matters today when the horse has become part of a multi-million-pound leisure industry. Horseracing in Ireland is one

The next generation of winners. A mother and foal relax at the Irish National Stud in Kildare. In the background are the ruins of the 'Black Abbey', founded by the Knights Hospitaller of St John who came to Ireland with the Normans in 1169.

of the country's biggest earners of foreign currency. Many of the wealthiest owners in the world bring their horses to Ireland to train them, and the National Stud at Kildare is more like a hotel than a set of stables. This is both the centre of the Irish bloodstock industry and also a shrine to the horse; for anybody who is crazy about horses it is an essential place to visit on the road to Ballinasloe.

The stud was set up by Colonel William Hall-Walker, the son of a Scottish brewer. He bought some land at Tully near Kildare with the intention of breeding Thoroughbred horses. He was remarkably successful at this and his breeding and management programmes have been described as inspired. He gave the stud to the British Crown, who rewarded him with the title of Lord Wavertree. The site is also famous for the Japanese Garden which is next to the stud. Colonel Hall-Walker was an admirer of the Orient and had this haven of tranquillity created in 1911 by Eida, the Japanese gardener at Tully.

This is a working stud, with individual boxes for the stallions that are kept there, in a modern, purpose-built block. Each box has the name of the horse and its achievements, and there is an intensive care unit for mares who have difficulty giving birth to their foals. The old coach house has been turned into a museum of the horse, and houses the preserved skeleton of Arkle, among the greatest Irish horses of all time.

One of the eccentricities of Colonel Hall-Walker was that he believed that the stars played a major role in determining how well horses would perform. He would actually cast a horoscope for every horse which was born at the stud and this determined what would happen to the foal. Those for which the horoscope held good would be raced, those whose horoscopes were less favourable would be sold. Because the Colonel wanted the moon and the stars to exercise their maximum possible influence over the foals, special skylights were built into the stallion boxes, which have also been incorporated into the new boxes built in the 1960s.

The National Stud is just a few miles from the Curragh, the vast, sprawling race-course that is the home of Irish racing. In the middle of the nineteenth century there were as many as 25 different courses at the Curragh, ranging from a course which was just over two furlongs to a 'cross-country' course more than four miles long.

There are two types of racing, Flat racing and National Hunt racing which includes steeplechasing and hurdling.

It is claimed that steeplechasing was invented in Ireland, with races taking place across the open countryside from one village to another. The steeples on the churches were the most prominent features in the landscape, and the riders would race from one church to the next, simply jumping over any obstacle that got in their way. The first recorded steeplechase was in County Cork in 1752, between Buttevant Church and the steeple at St Leger's Church at Doneraile.

There are now 28 race-courses in Ireland, and the favourable tax laws towards the bloodstock industry mean that owners bring their horses from all over the world to be bred here. The National Stud is just one of many breeding centres around the country.

In 1945 a Racing Board was established to promote horseracing and it has been so successful that recent figures showed that 12,000 people were employed in the industry. That accounts for five per cent of the agricultural labour force.

The long list of famous racehorses bred or trained in this country is a tribute to the skill of the people who run the industry. Shergar, Nijinsky and Arkle are just three whose names are synonymous with Irish racing.

Shergar, of course, was the Epsom Derby winner who was kidnapped in 1983 and never seen again.

Arkle, whose skeleton is preserved at the National Stud, is perhaps the best known Irish horse of all. He was bred in 1957 by the Baker family in North Dublin and in 1960 was bought by the Duchess of Westminster for 1,150 guineas. In his first season he ran six races and won two of them. That wasn't a bad start, but in the seasons that followed he was unstoppable. Of his remaining 29 races he won 25, and on all of those rides he was partnered by the jockey Pat Taaffe. He won the Cheltenham Gold Cup on three successive occasions, as well as the Hennessy Gold Cup in 1964 and 1965 and the King George VI Chase, also in 1965. It was in the same race the following year that his career was cut short when he broke a bone in his foot and had to be retired from racing. There was a time, when Arkle was at the height of his powers, when it was difficult to find owners willing to enter their horses against him.

Nijinsky was another famous Irish horse. Unbeaten in five races

as a two-year-old, he went on to win six major races including the English Triple Crown, the Irish Sweeps Derby and the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes at Ascot.

Royal Charger, Tulyar and Blandford (sire of four Derby winners) are other great Irish horses, all bred at Tully.

Horses are not just raced, they are also jumped, and Ireland has a reputation for breeding some of the finest showjumping horses in the world. The West of Ireland is a great breeding ground for jumping horses and Sportsman was one of the most famous of these, winning the George V Cup at Wembley in England in 1972, in partnership with David Broome.

Another favourite is Leapy Lad who was bred at Ennis in the West of Ireland, about 40 miles from Ballinasloe. Leapy Lad was sold at the Ballinasloe Fair as a three-year-old and in 1984 won the Aga Khan Cup. He was then sold for a quarter of a million pounds, a lot more than the price he would have fetched on the Fair Green at Ballinasloe. Eddie Macken's Oatfield Hills is another famous horse which was bred in this part of the world.

The top racehorse owners and showjumpers come from all over the world to Ireland for their horses. Because of the quality of the land and the grass they know that the horses bred here are as good as they will get anywhere, not just around the National Stud but across the whole of Ireland. It is because they keep coming back time and again that a small town in County Galway can claim to have the largest surviving horse fair in Europe.

Broken Hearted, one of the stallions, in his box. Although a modern design, the box incorporates the skylights favoured by Colonel Hall-Walker who believed that they allowed the maximum influence of the planets and stars on the horses.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ford on the Road to the High King

Picture a field the size of several rugby pitches. Imagine that field covered with nothing but horses, hundreds and hundreds of horses. Imagine what it is like when a small, sleepy town suddenly springs into life with wheeling and dealing, with songs and stories, when more than three hundred years of tradition and a thousand years of history collide, head-on, with the frenzied world of horse dealing. Travellers, farmers and tourists all come together for a week in celebration of the horse.

The Irish name for Ballinasloe is Béal Átha na Slua. The literal translation is the 'Ford Mouth of the Hostings'. Long before it became home to Europe's largest horse fair, this was a place where people met.

For much of the year this peaceful town sleeps. There is the occasional wild night, a few parties, and an odd 'All Ireland' football match or two to get the blood racing, but for the most part it is a quiet place.

It is the sort of backwater that you can either love or hate, or even love *and* hate. Many find it far too quiet, many leave because it *is* far too quiet, and yet many of them come back . . . eventually. The names above the shops are of families who have stayed, who have come to terms with the quiet nature of the place. They are the people who have built up lives where they are at peace with themselves. They don't feel the need for the hustle and bustle of the city. Here there are no big businesses, no captains of industry. The land is everything, and its fruitfulness has given Ballinasloe the fair which has made its name famous the world over.

Ballinasloe is on the edge of the Midlands: 120 miles to the east is Dublin, 40 miles to the west is Galway. To the outsider this may look like a dull, featureless landscape, but for the people who live here it is some of the most fertile ground in Ireland. In the country-

Ballinasloe, Co. Galway. In the centre is St Michael's Church and to the left is the Church of St John which overlooks the Fair Green.

side around Ballinasloe there is a noticeable mixture of green and grey—green fields surrounded by the grey of limestone walls. Fields are often littered with great limestone boulders which might have been dropped there, nonchalantly, by the gods as they went off to the west to build their mountains. The sky, like the land, is often grey, and forbidding, but in spring the gorse bushes burst into flames of yellow, giving a surprising brightness to the landscape. Many of these fields are rich in peat, either for burning or for compost, and from the train windows, on the way to Galway, you can see long trenches where the darkened turf has been ripped up out

of the ground and turned onto its back to dry as best it can in the damp and drizzle. Tractors struggle through the wet boggy ground to retrieve the fuel. Once upon a time these fields would have been full of horses and in some places the ground is so boggy that to this day only the horses can get through.

Green and grey is the secret of the success of this farming area. Limestone is rich in calcium, and any advertisement for milk and cheese will tell you that calcium is very good for your health. It is also excellent for horses, sheep and cattle. Thus the calcium under the soil becomes the goodness in the grass, and animals thrive. It gives them a really good bone structure and makes them healthy and productive. Irish horses are well known for their sturdiness. Breeds such as the Irish Draught have thrived for hundreds of years in this landscape, becoming tougher and tougher down the centuries.

So Ballinasloe has some of the richest countryside in the world around it, but that is not the whole story and the history of the town itself goes back a long way before the first official horse fair, although not quite as far as the first horse . . .

The River Suck to the south of the town is by no means one of Ireland's most significant rivers, but Ballinasloe is one of the most convenient places to ford it. The town, which was known as Dunlo until the sixteenth century, found itself sitting, rather beneficially, 40 miles, or one day's travel by horse, from Galway on one of Ireland's major travelling routes . . . from the 'Far West' to Tara, seat of the kings.

In those days this was, like many other countries, a feudal society; people would owe their allegiance to local barons and they in turn would swear loyalty and pay taxes to the king. Every so often those barons would be obliged to come and pay those taxes over, and hear about the laws which had been enacted. In truth, this usually meant new ways and excuses for yet more taxes. These great gatherings would take place at the royal palace in Tara. On the first day the official business would be conducted, and then on the second day there would be a chance to socialise. Later these social gatherings actually took place at Ballinasloe itself. This is where the 'Hostings' in the name of the town come from. In an age and a country where your nearest neighbour might be a couple of miles away,

gatherings such as this were vital to renew friendships, to trade, catch up on the local gossip, and perhaps above all a chance to meet the opposite sex. From these meetings the town of Ballinasloe developed, and thrived. The town eventually grew, over the centuries, to its present size of about six thousand people.

The history of this country has always been splashed with the blood of its people—at the hands of each other or of the many invaders who have seen Ireland as a ripe fruit to be picked off. Even a place that seems as peaceful as Ballinasloe has not escaped the country's turbulent past. At the end of the seventeenth century the Jacobites were in full retreat from Athlone, hotly pursued by the army of King William, and were caught at Aughrim Field near the town. That was the end of the Jacobite rebellion, and also the end of the Jacobite Leader General St Ruth who was slain at the battle.

By the eighteenth century most of the land around Ballinasloe was owned by the Earls of Clancarty, the Trench family. They originally came from Northumberland in Northern England. It was this family who were instrumental in developing the agriculture of the region—at one time they were said to own 25,000 acres of land in and around Ballinasloe. The need for good agriculture was shown by the famines of the nineteenth century: 1816, 1822, 1831, 1846 and 1847. Thousands died, and many thousands more decided that they had had enough of Ireland. They packed up what little they had and headed for the New World and a new life. They would travel first to England, to Liverpool, and from there would take a ship to the States. The ships had two cargoes: they brought cotton from the Deep South for the mills in Lancashire, and on the return passage they would take the cargo of people. The conditions in the early years were appalling, and many died before they reached the promised land, either from disease or malnutrition. People from Ireland joined the Scots who had been driven off their land during the Highland Clearances. Many of the emigrants found that once they reached the United States and did not have to pay the cruel rents demanded by the landlords back home in Ireland, they flourished. Some went on to become millionaires, tycoons and congressmen. The biggest Irish communities in the States are on the Eastern Seaboard, in places such as New York and Boston. During his time in office former President Ronald Reagan took great pride

in tracing his roots back to Ireland, and John F. Kennedy also had Irish blood. Some American visitors to Ballinasloe can, and do, trace their families back to those who fled from hunger in the nineteenth century.

Those who stayed tried their best to feed their families, but the harsh treatment of the landlords at the time made this almost impossible. The penalties for those who broke the law to get food were ruthless—men hanged at crossroads as a warning against sheep stealing and whole families driven from their smallholdings if they could not pay their rent. Some of the bitterness created at this time would fuel later risings, and ultimately lead to the Easter Rising of 1916, when a small group of republicans took over the Post Office in Dublin and declared the Irish Free State.

They were soon defeated and all met their deaths in front of British firing squads. They could never have succeeded with the lack of men and the lack of arms they had, but it was the spark which ignited the flame. Some of the people in the town today can remember the events of 1916 and beyond. Dermot Connolly, a local historian, recollects how in the 1920s he was taken to a public meeting in the centre of the town, addressed by a speaker from Sinn Fein. He recalls how the police were sent in to break the meeting up and how the blood flowed, almost in rivers, along the edge of the street and down the drains. Women and children ran in fear of their lives. His father was a member of Sinn Fein and he can remember living in the shadow of the RIC, the Royal Irish Constabulary.

'I grew up with the RIC on the stairs, raiding the house, because we used to sell a republican newspaper. I was very frightened when they came in.'

Of course the country is now a republic, its own master, and in the years since the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 agriculture has done very well, particularly under the European Community's common agricultural policy which is designed to make sure that Europe will never again be short of food. In the 1970s and '80s farmers were subsidised for the food they grew, but those subsidies are fast disappearing and the world recession has hit rural Ireland badly. Ballinasloe is still prosperous, but not as prosperous as it was once.

Change here has come, but it has come gradually and there is

still the feeling, especially coming from Dublin, that you are stepping back into the past. Until the 1950s there were very few motor cars in this part of the world. Many of the goods came in to Ballinasloe by canal until 1851 when the railway was opened up. The canal came into a harbour basin in the centre of the town. It's no longer there, for it has been filled in, as has much of the canal, although there are plans to re-open part of it. Guinness was shipped in from Dublin, wool was shipped back, as well as dairy products and even the animals themselves. Before the coming of the railways and during the famines, one of the biggest cargoes on the canal was people, going to Dublin to find a ship to take them away from Ireland.

There are three main streets in the centre of the town, coming together on a marketplace and the roundabout which, once a year, is the scene of the biggest traffic jam in the West of Ireland. These are Main Street, Dunlo Street and Society Street. Most of the buildings date back to the nineteenth century, and almost every other business is a bar. They come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes, old, modern, small and large. The Jekyll and Hyde bar, as its name suggests, has a double character. The front bar is spacious, elegant and plush, the back bar is a dark, wild sort of a place, a place where your soul could agreeably be lost for an hour or two, whence you can emerge blinking into the light just a little bit the worse for wear. Other bars are more basic, perhaps just a single room at the front with a bar and a large window facing onto the street. Dooley's lounge adjoins a shop and Hayden's is the grandest bar in town. The brightly painted shop fronts contrast with the grey colour of the buildings. Few are built from brick and most match the colour of the local limestone.

A few doors down the street is the Parish Shop, the place to redeem your soul. There are Bibles, prayer cards and rosaries on sale here. Whatever accessories the Lord has to offer, you can get them here with all the trimmings. They, too, are busy during the fair. Mainly it is for souvenirs, but there must be a few horse dealers

Overleaf: Ballinasloe at the turn of the century. Peat carts drawn by horses and donkeys line the streets ready to make their deliveries to local houses. Courtesy The National Library of Ireland

MEDICAL HALL

who fear that their passion for horses puts their souls in mortal danger.

There's a rosary for everyone: just like the horses, you can pick up something to match your style and your pocket.

So long as there has been civilisation there have been fairs. Fair-days and Feast days were and are the landmarks which map out people's lives. The festivals marked the seasons, with celebrations and ceremony to encourage the crops or to cast out the demons. As well as commemorating deities, or calling upon the gods to provide, the fairs were, and still are, places to trade. Sometimes the trading was in produce, on other occasions fairs actually traded in people. At Lisdoonvarna in County Clare, women would come to find a husband, and the farmers would come to seek wives. Many fairs were the places where agricultural workers were hired for the coming season. Other fairs were for the trading of goats, cattle, sheep or horses. Puck Fair was the great one for goats. The 'King of the Fair' at Puck is a wild goat which is caught a few days beforehand and then made the star of the show.

The Ballinasloe October Fair is the town's harvest, its Christmas. Many of the businesses depend upon this one week to keep them solvent for the rest of the year. This is the week when the bars run out of Guinness and the Garda actually enforce some sort of closing time.

This is the modern 'Hostings', the meeting in the name of the town. People are drawn, along with their horses, to the large Fair Green just to the north of the town centre, to deal, swap and trade in horses. For a few days every autumn the Fair Green turns to a seething mass of black and white and brown as horseflesh is bought and sold. The bushy green grass soon turns to a quagmire in the wet, churned up by thousands of hooves. For centuries this has been a cockpit of horse-dealing combined with a hectic, week-long party.

Ballinasloe is not the only horse fair in Ireland, but it is the biggest and, more importantly, as people in the town would argue, it is the best.

Although fairs of one sort or another were held in Ballinasloe from the fifth century, the fair as we know it today dates back about two hundred and fifty years.

Horses being sold on Main Street in the 1940s. Courtesy of Padraic Kilduff Photography Private Collection

Sheep, not horses, were originally responsible for this event. The Trench family were given a royal charter early in the eighteenth century to hold a sheep fair and it is from this that the horse fair has grown. The sheep fair was always held on the first Tuesday in October and the horse selling grew up around this date. The horses were sold on the Monday, and on the Friday fat cattle were sold. The fat cattle sales were particularly popular, and in the last century men were known to 'walk' cattle the 150 miles to Ballinasloe from as far away as North Kerry, resting them up in fields belonging to friendly farmers along the way. They would do about 20 miles per day, setting off in early September in order to make it to Ballinasloe in time for the fair. Now the sheep and the cattle are sold at market every week, rather than on the Fair Green, but the horses just keep coming back.

It was Frederick Trench who was given that first charter back in 1722 to hold the event on his own land, what is now the Fair Green. The Trench family, the Earls of Clancarty, were the 'Lords of the Manor', becoming bishops, dignitaries and MPs. There is a monument overlooking the Fair Green to the Honourable and Venerable Viro Carolo le Poer Trench, one of those who became a bishop. Close to the monument, on the northern side of the green, is the Bishop's Drive. The long drive to Garbally House, the seat of the Earls of Clancarty, runs in a straight line from St John's Church. When the Trench family supplied the local bishops, a curate would be posted at a set of railings at the front of the church to watch for the approach of the bishop's carriage. Now Garbally House is a secondary school for boys.

Horses no longer have the economic importance that they would have had in the early part of the nineteenth century when the Ballinasloe Fair was just one of many such events being held around Europe. They were used on the land to pull ploughs and carts, but they were also machines of war. An army might have marched on its stomach in those days, but it would not have marched very far at all without the help of thousands of horses. They would haul the food supplies and the weaponry, the cannons which were so devastating on the battlefield. They would also be the means by which the cavalry officers charged into battle. The Irish Draught was one of the most popular breeds of horse for military service,

and the place to come for Irish Draughts was Ballinasloe. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw many wars being fought across Europe and the battles claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of horses which had to be replaced when they were killed in battle. These were, somewhat delicately, referred to as remounts. Many of the buyers who came to the October Fair in the nineteenth century were quartermasters for the great armies of the world. They would come to buy Draught horses for the men and lighter, nimbler cavalry chargers for the officers. These were usually half-breds, but the generals would probably have ridden a pure thoroughbred. At that time in many armies the officers actually paid for their own horses and occasionally they would come personally to the fair to see what sort of bloodstock was available.

Rumour has it that half the horses at the Battle of Waterloo were bought at Ballinasloe, and these were not just the horses on the British side. The Irish connection applied to the French as well as the British and the Prussians. It seems that the Irish dealers were not too fussy about who they sold their horses to.

As well as the French and Prussians in the nineteenth century Russians came to Ballinasloe every year to buy horses for the Tsar's armies. They had their own horse fairs, but they were so impressed with the quality of the horses at Ballinasloe that they were prepared to travel to buy the animals they needed. Even as late as the 1920s there were still quartermasters coming to Ballinasloe Fair in search of horses. Despite the disastrous effect that tanks had on mounted cavalry in the opening months of the First World War, there was still the great tradition of the warrior on horseback and well into the twentieth century the British Army, as well as others in Europe, firmly believed that there was still a major role for the mounted cavalry to play. It was often the case that the tank regiments in many armies today grew out of the same cavalry regiments which those tanks laid waste back in the Great War.

The reason that the Irish Draught was so popular with the military was that it made such a good pack animal. It is not as fast as some of the other breeds available, but it has a strength and determination which made it ideal for the logistical support that a nineteenth-century army needed. Its good nature also suited the military, they wanted something which wouldn't become mutinous on a long cam-

paign. It's a sad fact that the fair actually had some of its best years after the big battles of the early nineteenth century.

In 1851 the railway came to Ballinasloe and suddenly the fair blossomed. For the first time there was a quick, cheap and easy way of getting your horses to and from the fair. The line runs from Athlone to Galway, but the opening of the railway enabled people to travel from all over Ireland to Ballinasloe.

Thousands of people would descend on the town, and sometimes horses would have to wait weeks rather than days to be shipped out. These were vintage years. Farmers were just beginning to recover from the devastating famines of the early nineteenth century, and although the landowners often tried to bleed their tenants dry there was an increasing amount of wealth around. This money was often spread liberally around the bars and hotels in the town. It can't have been that different from today, with every pub and bar full, people letting rooms and travellers and tinkers trying to make as much money as possible by selling everything from lucky charms to clothes pegs to people at the fair. There would be music and singing and scores of people tagging along as much for the entertainment as for the horses.

One nineteenth-century visitor was the famous patriot Wolfe Tone. Although he was a Protestant he was visiting County Galway on behalf of the Catholic Committee. He was also attempting to drum up support for a revolution in Ireland. Unfortunately, he noted in his diary that the farmers of Connaught were more interested in their bullocks than they were in freedom. He also complained about being unable to get any sleep because 'the gentleman in the room over my head was playing the bagpipes and the gentlemen in the room next door were singing.' Another well-known visitor was the writer Anthony Trollope, although what he thought of the fair was not recorded.

In the days before the motor car, and even well into the 1930s, horses were not just sold on the Fair Green, they were also sold in the streets.

One man who as a child lived at the end of Main Street, towards the edge of town, remembers how people would have to come all the way down Main Street from the town centre simply to cross the road because of the sheer number of horses on sale.

'The good horses were sold on the streets, but the best horses were actually sold from stables attached to the pubs and the bars, and they never got as far as the street or the Fair Green. The word would go around about a particular horse, at a particular stable, and the serious buyers would be invited in to take a look. In the case of a few of the best horses it would have been a seller's market. The buyers would have to come up with the right price to persuade the seller to part with his horse and in some cases you could have up to six different buyers, of different nationalities, trying to buy the same horse.'

The sellers would line the horses up in front of the bars on Dunlo

Horses for sale!

Street and Main Street and divide their time between doing deals on the street and getting drunk in the bars. It was probably a very effective way of selling: get your buyer well oiled and then sell him the horse. It is a technique which works very well to this day.

Things began to change for the fair around the beginning of the twentieth century. After the First World War the horses which were used in such vast numbers on the land began to give way to the internal combustion engine. Tractors took over much of the heavier work, and after that cars took over as the main form of transport. However, the use of horses on farms died out more slowly in Ireland than in England and the United States. Here, well into the 1960s, there were still farms worked exclusively by horses, whereas in the United Kingdom and the United States tractors took over very soon after the end of the Second World War. Even so there is a feeling that many farmers took to tractors too quickly. With the smaller farms in Ireland there was often too little work for such a large investment as a tractor, and in the tough, wet, soggy bogs the tractors would get stuck in the sort of ground that posed no problem to an Irish Draught horse or a Connemara pony.

Another change that came to the fair was that the cattle and sheep selling almost completely disappeared from the Fair Green itself. There are still a few cattle and sheep sold in the marketplace during the fair, but the vast majority now go to auction marts and are sold all the year round. As agriculture advanced, so the dependence upon the traditional fair, held on a fixed date, disappeared. The prospects for the survival of the fair began to look bleak. Although there were still horses being sold in the town at the time of the fair week they were in their hundreds rather than their thousands. All around Europe the old horse fairs were disappearing, and it looked as if Ballinasloe could become just another piece of history.

The revival of this remarkable event came about because the traders in the town realised that the income from the local population and the farmers alone would not keep them all in business. In the late 1950s those traders believed that if the fair could be revived there could be significant benefits for them and the town in terms of trade and tourism. One of the moving forces behind this revival was Paul Dooley, owner of the bar and grocery shop on the corner of Dunlo Street and Harbour Road.

The man who saved the fair. Paul Dooley behind the counter of his shop.

At first pageantry was tried, reviving the tradition of a King of the Fair being brought into the town on a canal barge. The town's Chamber of Trade took over the running of the event and the revival began. They recognised that they had to adapt to the new ways, that horses were being used not for work, but for pleasure . . . By the 1960s the horse was becoming a plaything, and the big market was for animals that could be used for hunting or showjumping or perhaps just as pets. The committee realised that the better the quality of the horses on the Fair Green, the better known the fair would become. They reckoned that if the fair was to have a future it would have to be seen as the best place in Ireland to buy a horse. It was decided that the fair should have some element of competition introduced into it. This has happened in two ways, by forging links with the Agricultural Show which happens at the same time as the horse fair, and with the introduction of a lunging competition. Lunging, or riderless jumping, is actually held on the Fair Green itself. The Agricultural Show, which is held on a separate ground next to the Fair Green, includes jumping competitions for different classes of horse and on the final Saturday of the fair the All-Ireland Foals competition is held. It is another event which has been built in to the show to capture the imagination of the horse-lovers of Ireland.

In terms of money the prizes on offer are not great, but the prestige is. Horses and money are both symbols of status, but few people love money for its own sake the way that they love horses. Here, the love of horses rules . . . it's just that to get the horse you'd like to love, you have to have the money to persuade the owner to part with it. For the sellers there is a double advantage to this element of competition: they have the pride of winning and the chance that their horse will be worth more as a competition winner.

Today Ballinasloe Fair is still one of the great horse fairs in the world. It claims to be the largest in Europe, and there is no reason to doubt that claim. It is certainly a lot bigger than Appleby, the main horse fair in England. The event has survived both an increase in commercialism and a fundamental change in the farming life of Ireland. Now it is seen not just as a place for buying and selling horses, but also as an event to attract tourists into the country. In Ballinasloe alone, it is calculated that more than 50,000 extra visitors

pass through the town during fair week, certainly when the event was at its height in the last century there were thought to be 30,000 visitors to the fair each year. They are also likely to go to other parts of Ireland and spend money elsewhere, which is good news for an economy which has faced such difficulties in recent years. The future of the fair is, on the face of it, fairly rosy, but there are problems lurking, some of which are brought about by the fair's own success. Any event of this size will create a certain amount of disruption to a town the size of Ballinasloe. The traders love it, but not all the townspeople think it is such a good thing. There are some mutterings that maybe Ballinasloe would be better off if the fair was at least a bit smaller. The other problems are practical ones. It is becoming harder and harder to get insurance for the event. There have been accidents in the past few years and increasingly people are becoming more and more worried about public safety. Many feel that if people want to risk getting kicked by a horse, then that is their affair and nobody should interfere. It is always difficult to strike a balance between a great tradition such as the fair and the need to ensure public safety. In recent years the organising committee has been pressing for the Town Council to restrict the number of traders coming onto the site. This would allow more room for the selling of horses, and along with that a greater distance between the horses. That would help to reduce any risks to the public.

The biggest threat that the fair has faced in the past has been apathy, now it is the possibility that it might just be too big. It is an impossible situation: to keep things down to size the fair would have to be regulated, and that would destroy its very charm. Every year the need for sponsorship grows greater, for the more people that come, the more is needed to cater for them. Somebody has to pay for the extra police and security guards. One of the biggest sponsors of the event over the past few years has been the drinks firm Guinness. This is no coincidence: there is probably more of their product sold in the town during fair week than in most of the rest of the year.

The fact that the fair has survived and prospered is very much due to the hard work of the people of the town. Their reward is not just in the trade that the horses bring but in the higher profile for the town, and for County Galway.

CHAPTER THREE

The October Fair

Welcome to the field of dreams, horseflesh as far as the eye can see, brown and black and white and grey on green. For the horse-lover this is a paradise on earth. It is a place where fortunes are made and lost. Over the next week a top show-jumper might just be bought for a song, or a prize stallion turn out to be impotent and worthless. Every man has his chance at Ballinasloe. This is the greatest horse extravaganza in Europe, one of the last great feasts of horse-trading left in this age of the auctioneer, the electronic sale and the selling ring. Nothing compares with the wheeling and the dealing, the music and song and the stories told here for a week every October.

This is a horse fair in the old sense. The buying and the selling of the animals actually takes place on the Fair Green. It is a large patch of land just to the north of the town centre. Wide and open, at first glance it might seem like a bleak place; certainly before the horses arrive it's easy to get that impression. On a cold day the wind slices through from the West and the North, and the lashing rain can soak through the most impenetrable wax jacket . . . hands freeze to the bone. On a good day the sunset can be spectacular and the late summer sun can make you feel glad to be alive, but it's the horses that bring this place to life. Whatever the weather, come the fair, the horses and their followers will be out in force.

The Fair Green is surrounded on two sides by higher ground and overlooked at the eastern corner by the Church of Ireland in the shape of the church of St John. It's not quite an amphitheatre, but parts of it feel that way at times. People lean against the railings that run along the edge of the slope, standing, watching what is going on below.

It seems like half the horses in Ireland could be here, along with every horse-box, hundreds of travellers, and old men with craggy,

rugged features to match. Their faces are like the hard rocks on the land they work, lashed and cracked by gales and winds; their eyes shine with the wisdom of their years and their hearts warm to good company and the talk of horses. Their complexions are the colour of peat water, their hair is white, and their hands are the rough hands of working men. This is their meeting place, a chance for them to see old friends, chat, deal and indulge themselves in the horses. On the outside the purpose of the fair is to buy and sell horses, but there's far more to it than just that. This is a tradition that lives where others have died.

'If a man was to want a horse to bring on then this is the place to come. There's a horse here for everyman,' according to one of the buyers. It seems that there is every sort of man as well.

In coming to Ballinasloe the farmers and the dealers, the travellers and the punters are doing their bit to ensure that this tradition does survive.

The fair itself lasts for eight days but the buying and selling of horses really takes place during the first and last weekends; the rest of the time is taken up with social events in the town which are put on for the benefit of locals and tourists.

There is now an official start on the first Sunday, when a carnival procession winds its way past the marketplace. Marching bands mingle with tractor salesmen, and every church, school and youth club in the area is represented. In the old days there never used to be anything as formal as an opening ceremony, but marketing conventions and the needs of tourism seem to demand that age-old traditions are now officially started . . . and sponsored. Often a major national celebrity is asked to perform this opening ceremony. One recent person to have the honour of opening the fair was the former Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. 'C. J.', as he's usually known, has a phenomenal following in this part of Ireland which is solid in its support for his party, Fianna Fail. He walked up on stage, ordered the rain to stop, which it did, hinted he might one day return to power, accepted the gift of a pair of shoes, gave his body-guards the slip and was last seen talking horses somewhere on the Fair Green. There was a rumour that the guest of honour actually bought a horse.

Ballinasloe Fair starts off with a carnival parade, and that is more

or less how things continue. There are crowds and there is congestion, but there is also a wonderful atmosphere. Every bar in the town will be tested to the limit, polythene sheets are put down in the few which have carpets. The Guinness will run out, songs will be sung and nobody will go to bed until well into the morning. For one week in the year this small, peaceful town is stretched to bursting point. Those numbers are often swelled by the returners, people long since left for other lands, who have come back to visit, to meet old friends and family; but the wonderful thing about the fair is that even if you were not born in Ballinasloe, or even in Ireland, you

At the height of the fair there can be as many as two thousand horses at Ballinasloe.

can still come back year after year and see the same old faces.

'It's the greatest event that comes the year . . .' muses one old farmer, long retired. But Ballinasloe isn't just one single horse fair . . . it's two! The thousands of horses on the Fair Green fall into two very distinct categories. Travellers' or Gypsies' horses, and the farmers' horses. The farmers, the country gentlemen and the horsy people bring their Irish Draught horses, Connemara ponies, Shet-

land ponies, their Hunters and perhaps a Thoroughbred or two. This is the part of the fair which goes back the farthest, back to that first official sheep fair in 1722. In the past these would have been the horses sold to work the land or fight the battles of Europe.

The other side to the fair is where the travellers' horses are sold. On a wet and windy day their animals look a sorry sight. Like the farmers the faces of the travellers have a 'lived-in' look to them. They too are as weatherbeaten as the Galway rocks. Years of living on the road and perhaps some 'Gypsy' blood give many of the men an unwashed, suntanned appearance. Their horses might not, at first glance, seem much to look at, but they do fetch some serious money. They are mostly 'black and whites', heavy cobs which would have been used on farms in the past as workhorses, but which now play the part of giant pets and status symbols.

Each side of the fair has its own ground, its own territory. The farmers and their horses take up most of the grassy area, the travellers sell their horses in one corner, which is mostly covered with concrete. The farmers can't understand the prices paid for the travellers' horses and the travellers have little interest in the hunters and the jumpers.

'It's just crazy the prices those fellows will pay. I can't see it myself, they're not even such good-looking horses,' says one local farmer, who is doing his best to hang on to a Thoroughbred which wants to wander off elsewhere.

On the other side of the Green one of the travellers explains that if it isn't black and white he doesn't want to know. They might not have much time for each other's horses, but there is a common bond between the two sides of the fair. That bond is a respect for the horse, and a love of doing a deal.

The travellers are the first to arrive. They hit town up to two weeks or more before the start of the fair. They are the heart and soul of this event, but they are received with mixed feelings . . . Without them the fair would be a lot duller, but they get blamed for all sorts of things. According to some of the locals the travellers are responsible for burglaries, drunkenness, litter and putting lives at risk with the way they drive their sulkies, or traps, up and down

A place on the hill. A farmer with a mare and a Connemara pony to sell.

to show the horses off. There is certainly some trouble but this isn't the fault of the travellers alone.

For the travelling community this is a major social event, perhaps nearer to the origins of Ballinasloe than for anyone else here. Their large families extend way beyond Galway and this is their one chance each year to mix, meet, tell tales, trade, fight and live as a community. There have always been travellers and Gypsies who came to Ballinasloe, but they've only come in really big numbers since the fair was revived in the 1960s. Before the last war there were travellers who came here, but not in the same sort of strength that there are now, and somehow they didn't seem to be such a major part of the fair. In the past few years it seems that the travellers have made the event their own.

They set up site on the hill under the church, a community of chrome palaces on wheels. Trailers and vans, trucks and cars. By the start of the fair there will be about 60 or 70 trailers on the hill,

The travellers' horses are black and white . . . and cost a small fortune.

with many more on the edges of the town itself. The travelling community is built on wheels. The modern traveller makes the best possible use of the wide range of four-wheel-drive vehicles available—four-legged drive is mainly for pleasure or racing these days.

The essence and the beauty of this fair is that there is nobody to oversee or organise the buying and selling of the horses. The event has its own momentum. People know that Ballinasloe Fair is on, they know it's a place where horses are bought and sold and that is why they come. Nobody organises the selling and the buying, but the prices which are agreed at the fair seem to acquire a direction of their own. Some years the prices will be high, other years they'll be rock bottom.

You don't have to ask anybody's permission to sell here, you just turn up with your horse. It is purely up to the buyers and the sellers out on the field. They make the deals and they hand over the money. There is nobody regulating the selling and the buying. The introduction of a vet onto the field is only a recent innovation. Buyers can use the vet to inspect an animal which they might be considering buying. For a fee they can get professional advice on whether it is sound or not, but there is nobody who would try to stop an animal being sold on the field. It is up to the buyer to make a judgement on whether he should go ahead with the sale. Nobody keeps any records of what is bought or sold either, and that is why nobody is ever one hundred per cent certain whether a horse which becomes famous in future years really was sold at Ballinasloe.

The fair does have an organising committee, but they are not there to control the way the horses are traded. They play a vital role in keeping the fair going from year to year, and in organising the events which go on in the town during fair week. They work closely with the Town Council to try to ensure that the event goes smoothly, and they work vigorously to promote it, but they have nothing to do with the actual deals done on the Fair Green itself. The buying and selling is the central event, everything else comes second to that.

It's unlikely that the committee or the Town Council would ever get involved in the way the deals are done, but they are having to

Overleaf: The streets fill to overflowing for the opening ceremony.

GARDA STATION

introduce more and more organisation into the way the fair is run. The Town Council, for instance, is trying to regulate the Fair Green more strictly. A few years ago there was no charge for the traders coming on to the Green; now they have to pay, and that includes the travellers. The Council takes the money and uses it to police the fair. Throughout the week security guards patrol the site and make sure that all the traders who want to get onto it have paid their dues. Those security guards have also helped to cut down on most of the trouble which has hit the fair in recent years.

Although the horse dealers don't pay to come onto the Fair Green that was not always the case. In the last century the Earls of Clancarty would charge people to bring a horse onto the site . . . *and* to take it off again. The incentive was to sell. If you got rid of your horse you did not have to pay to leave. That money-spinning tradition died out when the land on which the fair was held was given over to 'the farmers of Roscommon and East Galway'.

* * *

The first activity is on the Saturday. From early in the morning the horse-boxes will start to arrive, not at the Fair Green itself, but on the edge of town. They disgorge their load of horses and these are led or trotted onto the Green.

On this first Saturday you will only see the travellers' horses, the black and whites. They are always ready to deal, but at this stage in the fair they will mostly be looking. The real action starts on the Sunday. At the crack of dawn the traffic chaos begins, and by breakfast time the Garda will almost certainly be presiding over the annual Ballinasloe traffic jam.

As I mentioned earlier, the Fair Green isn't all green: some of the grass has been covered with concrete. Part of this is used during the fair for market stalls and road-testing or 'flashing' the travellers' horses; the rest is used for the selling of those black and white horses.

If you buy a horse at Ballinasloe you get what you see—it's a case of 'buyer beware' unless you get the animal inspected by the vet. That is why the potential buyers need to see the horses perform along a concrete strip which runs down one side of the Fair Green. The farmers have their own way of showing off their horses, but

the travellers use this test track. On the first Saturday of the fair, when the rest of the Fair Green is free from horses, the travellers show off their horses to each other.

At one end of the strip, in the south-western corner of the Fair Green, a steep set of steps leads up to the road above. This is where the travellers lead their horses down onto the Fair Green. This place is not for the faint-hearted. The horses here have a look of the wild in their eyes. Sometimes a wild look will turn to a fearful look, and where the two mix all hell can break loose. A frightened horse is a dangerous horse, and in this corner there is plenty for them to be fearful about. It's all too easy to be walking past the back end of a horse when it decides to launch both its rear hooves towards you.

On the main part of the field the farmers have a different way of 'road-testing' their horses. The northern part of the old field has been taken over by an All Ireland Football Pitch and the showground, where a showjumping event is held at the same time as the fair. Many of the horses which jump in the show are then put into the fair to be sold. If your horse performs well in the show, it might fetch a better price on the Fair Green.

Then there is the lunging ring. This is a fenced-off area where the horses are tested over a single jump, whilst on the end of a lunging rein. Lunging was the traditional way of training horses for hunting. The horse is attached to a long leather 'lunging' rein, usually about 20 to 30 feet in length. At first it is walked round in a circle with the trainer in the middle, then gradually it is encouraged to jump over obstacles. This is done without a rider on its back. There are two elements to the judging of this particular competition.

The height of the obstacle is gradually increased as the jumping skills of the horse improve. This competition has been introduced in the past few years to try to improve the standard of the horses which are being put into the fair. The horses will jump over the fence in the lunging ring until it is too high for them. Then the judges look at the conformation of the horse. They are looking for a horse which jumps freely, rather than one which has to be forced to go at the fence. There is also the appearance of the horse. Limbs, bone structure and the look of the muscles are all rated in the scoring. Sixty per cent of the marks are awarded for the actual jumping and 40 per cent for the conformation of the horse. The winner is

the horse which ends up with the most marks. The prize money isn't that much, but it is reckoned that, as with the showjumping, a good performance in the lunging ring can add several hundred pounds to the value of your horse. It is all a part of the salesmanship involved in the fair.

One of the judges explains. 'We'd hope that by being lunged they'd be able to go on and do that bit more when they are in the saddle, but ultimately it depends whether the horse gets into the right hands.'

The Sunday and the Monday of the first weekend are the really big days of the fair. Late on the Saturday night the majority of the horses start arriving in the town. The roads for miles around are littered with horse-boxes of every shape and size. The horses will be led, one or two at a time, down the streets to the Fair Green. This gives the fair the feel of the old days when the farmers would walk or ride into the town from many miles around.

The traders and the food vans arrive as well. From early in the morning they pile on to the field. By lunchtime on the Sunday Ballinasloe *looks* like a town which is mad about horses. As the Fair Green fills up it changes colour, both in appearance and in reality. Most of the farmers' horses are brown or grey, and by the middle of the afternoon the green colour of the field has turned mostly to brown. By the end of the second day much of that brown comes from the stuff the horses leave behind. It is the smell which lingers longest in the memory—a volatile mixture of horse manure, urine and the rancid odour of the hot-dog stands. If it rains there is the mud as well. Ballinasloe Fair is not for those lacking in stamina or for people with sensitive nostrils.

This is a beauty contest with a difference. The contestants are horses and the prize is a good price. The men, and it is mainly men who do the selling, stand proud on the field with their horses. It is almost as if some of them are loath to sell. Sometimes they are actually quite glad not to.

'I couldn't get a good enough price, but what the heck! She's a good mare, I'll breed her again this spring and I'll have a foal to sell again next year,' says one farmer at the end of the Sunday night as he leads his prize mare back to the horse box and home.

What makes Ballinasloe, and indeed all traditional fairs, so special

is the way that the horses are actually sold, the way that the deals are done.

One local historian describes the dealing as a kind of courtship ritual: 'A bit like *The Bartered Bride* . . . you know, the opera by Smetana.' The way the deals are done on the field at Ballinasloe today is the same way that the deals were done on the same field 250 years ago, and like *The Bartered Bride*, many of them involve a matchmaker, a go-between.

In the presence of a horse the two parties come together, although once again, you'd hardly notice it! The seller will look around, talk

Lunging. Note the special bar on the side of the fence to stop the lunging rein from getting snagged.

to his mate standing beside him, and look around a bit more. The buyer will walk past the horse, perhaps only noticing it very slightly. They both know the score, they both have the same interest and perhaps they both want the same outcome, only the price will be different. The outsider will see nothing; the true message is in the eyes, the look of the seller and the buyer. They know if they can, or want to, do business.

'How's it going . . . ?'

This could be a pleasantry tossed around, or it could be the signal for the start of the courtship dance.

'She's a fine mare, you'll not see one better this side of Tullamore . . .'

The buyer will then start to examine the horse a little more closely. He will have a look at the state of the hooves, feel the muscles and perhaps have a look at the teeth. An experienced buyer can look at the teeth and tell immediately how old the horse is. The horse will be walked around to show the way it moves. The seller might then give a price, and in the best tradition of the fair this will be far more than the buyer is willing to pay. If a deal is going to happen it will. The buyer knows what he will pay, the seller knows what he will accept.

Very little time is spent by the buyer deciding whether or not he wants the horse. If he is not keen, no amount of salesmanship can persuade him. If he is interested, the next thing he will probably do is start to wander off. Like a suitor at a dance he plays it cool, he doesn't move in straight away. However much he wants that horse, he won't let on. The buyer is always reluctant, playing hard to get.

At this stage in the proceedings a third party might get involved. The 'tangler' is a matchmaker: he wants to see the buyer wander off into the sunset with the horse, whilst the seller counts his money. This intermediary will grab the hand of the buyer and literally drag him back to the horse. These 'tanglers' are sometimes friends of one of the parties—usually the seller—or they are just people who see an opportunity and grasp it. They would almost certainly be known to one party or the other and might well be a mutual acquaintance of both.

A tangler makes his money from commission on the sale. No sale, no commission. He will reason with the buyer, then reason with

the seller; he makes his money from making the sale happen. All three know the price, but there is a ritual to be performed before the deal can be cemented. The key to a deal taking place is the slapping of hands between the two parties. Without this there can be no sale. Deals are done the world over in this way.

The tangler will grab the hand of the buyer and that of the seller and pull the two together, trying to get the two parties to slap their hands down. He will take the hand of the seller and slap his own hand on it, indicating that he thinks a reasonable price has been offered.

'Come on, you'll not get better than that, and if you wait you won't get as good. Take two (thousand) for it.'

He will then take the hand of the buyer and slap that against his own to indicate that he thinks that he should offer a little more.

'Just another 50 and he'll take it, go on you're getting a bargain anyway.'

The dealing can last anything up to ten or fifteen minutes, but usually it is over in two or three. One important element is 'luck money', a small amount given by the seller back to the buyer—a sort of present to go with the horse to wish it luck. Like so many of the things that go on around the Fair Green there's a strange ritual to this. The luck money usually amounts to just a few pounds, but it is always given separately from the money which has just been handed over to purchase the horse. For instance, the buyer will hand over his £2,000 for a foal to the seller. The seller will pocket this money in his jacket, whilst reaching down into his trouser pocket and handing back £20 in 'luck money'. Because the money is to wish the horse luck in its future career, very often there will be a 'silver' coin in the money which is handed over.

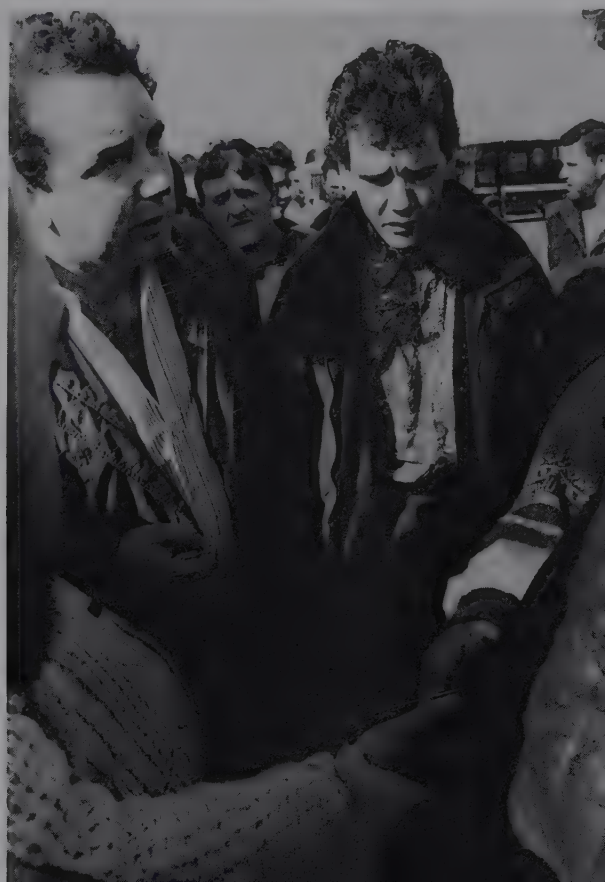
If a deal can be reached then the two parties will slap hands together. The tangler will go off with his commission and very sore hands. Of course this is how it should be done, and how tradition demands that it should be done, but there will always be people who do it differently. Sometimes it's a nod or a wink and the deal is sealed, sometimes it's almost as if the deals are done for show, sometimes all that happens is an exchange of telephone numbers and a deal will be done later. But above all the system works.

It's the same sort of ritual with both sides of the fair, for the

Left: A deal in the making. The tangler, right, is reaching for the hand of the buyer . . .

Above: The deal is almost sealed. The tangler just has to get the buyer and seller to slap each other's hands.

Right: They shake hands, and it's all over bar the payment.



travellers' and the farmers' horses, except that in the case of the travellers the bargaining seems to be done by teams of people rather than two individuals, and it can seem very aggressive at times. This display is largely 'front', for show, and the actual prices and deals are worked out afterwards in the bar, or occasionally in a fist fight.

Of course this way of dealing is not exclusive to Ballinasloe; it happens the world over, and it goes on at other Irish fairs. In a way it is a gesture of defiance by the buyers and sellers. Only they know how much the horses are changing hands for. They have no time for anybody who wants to drag intrusive bureaucracy into their lives.

Many of the people involved in buying and selling are naturally cagey—farmers and horse dealers the world over are like that. They like to run their affairs with a nod and a wink, they mind their own business and they certainly have little time for the taxman, accountants or 'men from the ministry'. All the dealing is done in cash, and the price which appears to be agreed might not be that which is actually paid. There is a lot at the fair which is for public consumption, and what the public is told isn't always what is actually happening. Status is very important to horse dealers and if this means agreeing one price and actually paying another, then so be it.

By the middle of the Sunday afternoon there may be as many as 3,000 horses in the town of Ballinasloe. The opening ceremony takes place in the centre of town, largely ignored by the horse dealers but not by the thousands of people who come into the town to watch. On the field, in a good year, there is hardly room to move. As with the travellers' corner of the field, things can get a bit hairy. A notice says that people entering the field do so at their own risk, and the dangers are very real. Horses are naturally nervous creatures and are ill at ease in such large groups, with so many people around them. The Fair Green is an alien environment and they often react with alarm to what is happening. One horse will suddenly get alarmed and those around it will rear up, or a horse might break away and run loose, or perhaps it might decide to take its seller on

All the deals are done in cash.

a run around the field. Even the most experienced farmers risk getting kicked or bitten by one of the horses.

Most of the horses are held by a short rope and a halter, some are simply ridden onto the Green and held by the reins. Very young foals which are still feeding from their mothers just stay loose by the mare's side; there is no risk that they will wander off when food is at hand.

Some of the horses standing on the Green will have a lump of earth on their rump. This is to show that they have been sold already, although a marker pen is sometimes used these days instead. The horses are not always taken by the buyer straight away, and sometimes not at all. Sometimes the seller looks after the horse overnight and then the buyer will sell it on to another dealer in the morning. It's a funny old business, horse-dealing.

The dealing will go on until the last of the light is gone, but the majority of the horses start to leave the field about five o'clock in the afternoon; the sellers may be disenchanted not to have achieved a sale by then, or perhaps they are cold, tired and fed up; most of all they want to get away before everybody else in order to beat the traffic jams.

The event ends with the 'Country Fair' day. This is the final Saturday and it is different in character from the rest of the fair. In the old days the sheep were sold on the Tuesday, the fat cattle on the Friday and the horses on the other days. The final Saturday was a sort of 'last chance to sell', the day to get a real bargain, when the farmers brought in all the stock they had been unable to sell during the week. This tradition has continued and has been incorporated into the modern fair. Makeshift pens will be constructed on the Fair Green and sheep will be offered for sale from them; a few cattle might also be sold here as well, but this is the big day for foals. The 'All-Ireland' Foal competition has been incorporated into the final Saturday and in the past few years this has made it a lot busier. For many of the people of the town this is their day at the fair. Many of the travellers have started to leave, or gone back to England. This is the day when the local people can sit back, relax and enjoy themselves.

By the end of the week more than 2,000 horses will have changed hands, and another couple of thousand will have stood, all day

On Country Fair day sheep are sold from pens on the Fair Green, just as they were at the first official fair back in 1722.

long, on the Fair Green with no sale achieved. Many of them will do exactly the same the following year, and the year after that. For the horses, for the buyers and for the country people Ballinasloe is a place that you just keep coming back to, year after year after year.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Farmers' Horses

The two different sides of the fair, the farmers and the travellers, have a lot in common. Like the Jekyll and Hyde bar on Dunlo Street, they are two sides of the same coin—two different souls united in the same body by their love of horseflesh, but split over the use, the type and the price of their animals. They come to Ballinasloe because they like this way of doing business. Most of the sellers here would not be seen dead at an auction house. It's not their way.

You can tell these two different parts of the fair far more easily by looking at the horses than by looking at the people. The main part of the Fair Green is where you will find the horses bred and sold by the farmers. In the old days these were the horses that worked the land and pulled the plough; now they include the showjumpers and the ponies much loved by young girls. Here the horses are black or brown or chestnut or grey. Some of these horses have a lineage, they have ancestors, their names appear in stock books. Others are mongrels, charming, bright-eyed but without any pedigree.

The farmers don't start arriving until the first Sunday. Some are smallholders, many have medium- or even large-sized farms, but there are also many who run riding stables or who pay others to look after their horses. Although horses are not used on the land any more, it seems that no farmer would want to be without one.

'People buy horses just to have them on their gardens, or farms; everybody buys a horse because their neighbour's got one,' explains a dealer from the North. 'It's just keeping up with the Jones's.'

Sometimes a seller will bring twenty horses, sometimes just one. It is not uncommon for someone to bring several horses to sell on behalf of a neighbour. Like the travellers, the farmers have rugged faces. Some wear ragged clothes, some come in their Sunday best, some have all their teeth, some have none. The old farmers have a

sense of pride, both in their horses and in their way of life. Those who dress in their Sunday best will sometimes also spend hours preparing their horses, so that even if they don't sell they can be proud of the animal they are standing next to; others take the attitude that too much work on a horse can be a bad thing. The gentry mix effortlessly with the old farmers—indeed, some of those farmers may be richer than the gentry. Each has his or her own idea of where to stand on the field, and some come back to the same spot year after year—it's a sort of homing instinct. For many of them this is the event they live for; they breed their horses specifically to sell at this fair. This is a gathering of horsy people driven by their passion for horseflesh.

'I've been coming here since I was five,' says Pat Cash, a dealer from Borris in Ossory. 'My father was a horse-dealer, my grandfather was a horse-dealer. I've been coming so long I can't actually remember the first time I came.'

On this side of the fair there is a wide range of breeds, from the tiny Shetland ponies right up to the Thoroughbreds, with a few Donkeys thrown in for good measure. Most of the horses are either half- or three-quarter-bred Irish Draughts. Very few of the horses on the Fair Green are Thoroughbreds. Racehorses sell for tens or even hundreds of thousands of pounds, and they are almost always sold in the auction ring or through private deals, although there have been rumours in the past that some Thoroughbreds at Ballinasloe have gone on to win on the race-course . . .

Not only is there a wide range of breeds here, but the ages of the horses vary. Because the fair is held in October it is an ideal place to sell mares with foals which have been born during the summer, or mares who are 'in-foal' and due to give birth the following spring. Of course, on the final Saturday there is the 'All-Ireland' Foal competition and a lot of the foals from that are sold here. The mares and foals can either be sold together or separately, if the foals are old enough. Sometimes the mares are sold on the first weekend and the foals are kept back for the following Saturday when they might get a better price.

Half-breds are the most common of the horses on display. These are a mixture of Irish Draught and Thoroughbred. Half-breds make very good showjumping horses, and some of the greatest Irish

On the Monday of the fair, as the Green starts to fill up, a Connemara pony takes a mud bath.

Showjumpers of all time have passed through Ballinasloe at some time during their careers. Leapy Lad, whom we met in chapter 1, is probably the most famous. He is a typical example of a horse which was bought cheap at Ballinasloe and then sold on for a large amount of money. This is the mystique of Ballinasloe, wondering which horse could be the one that wins at Hickstead, or in the Olympics in years to come.

Sportsman was another famous showjumping horse who was rumoured to have changed hands at Ballinasloe. It is said, usually

by the breeders, that it is far harder deliberately to breed a good showjumper than it is to breed a good racehorse. That is why a horse bought on the Fair Green here, for relatively little money, may go on to achieve great things in the showjumping arena. If there is one reason above all else why horses are bought here, it is for jumping. That is why the Agricultural Show, which is held at the same time as the fair, is so important. Buyers can see a horse in action before they spend their money.

The buyers are a mixed bunch. They come from all over the world and from all over Ireland, from both the south and the 'North'. They also come from as far away as Canada, Sweden and the United States. They are attracted by the quality of horses that this country can produce, the injection of fresh bloodstock and the possibility of a bargain.

There are bargains to be had at the fair, but a good eye and good bargaining skills can save hundreds of pounds. Ballinasloe Fair is a bit like the stockmarket: the idea is to sell when the price is high and buy when the price is low. The wise buyer will know the exact moment to come into the market, and the difference could be several hundred pounds. The market develops a feel for the quality of horses at the fair. If the demand is high, for instance in a year when the buyers decide that the quality is particularly good, then the best time to buy could be at the beginning of the fair. Good horses sell quickly, the word spreads that the quality is high and suddenly the prices start to shoot up. There might not be anything decent left by the Monday afternoon and the buyers could end up empty-handed. On the other hand, if it is a quiet year, with a lack of demand and poorer horses, then the best bargains come at the end of the first weekend of the fair, on the Monday afternoon. With winter coming on, many sellers would rather part with their horses for a lower price than face the cost and trouble of having to feed them over the winter months.

Those people who do well out of the fair are the ones who can spot the way that the market is moving. They will probably have a rough idea, before they come to the fair, about the prices which the horses may be expected to fetch. After all, Ballinasloe Fair does come at the end of the season and anybody who has been to the other fairs around Ireland will be able to judge the quality of the

horses being sold. The real skill is judging the mood of the fair from initial impressions.

Also, there is the difficulty of sorting truth from fiction. Ballinasloe has one of the most effective rumour mills in the Northern Hemisphere. The word is spread, it travels, it gets honed and moulded, it has a drink, and by the time it gets back onto the Fair Green the following morning that horse you sold yesterday is suddenly worth several hundred pounds more than what you got for it. Truth and horse prices are not good bedfellows. The only time you should believe the price of a horse is if you are the one handing over the money, and then you can never be sure of its value. This does not mean that people are robbed: if the sellers were ripping off the buyers in a big way they would never come back. It is an accommodation: the buyers know that the sellers overstate the value of a horse, the sellers know that the buyers are always 'trying it on', seeing how low they can force them. The only certainty is that the buyers will complain they are being charged too much, and the sellers will complain that nobody is willing to offer good prices.

'At this fair, like any other fair, it's up to the man to know what he's getting into buying. You have to use your own judgement, you take a look and if it suits you then you ask the price.' But then Sean's not a man who's that likely to be ripped off. He grew up around horses and can spot a bargain at fifty paces. 'Once you pay your money then it's yours, and that's the end of it. The horse might drop dead an hour later but that's it, you got in to buy. But it's all part of the trade, it's good sport, it's good fun!'

There is also a strange etiquette about asking prices at the fair.

'You can't ask a man the price of his animal unless you're in to buy her. Because if you walk away from him he'll get vexed.' The logic is strange but true. You'd have to be sure that you were seriously interested in buying the horse before you asked the price. Of course, one easy way out of this is to ask the price and then counter it with something that you know the seller won't accept. The only problem with this is that it might have one of two consequences—either a bloody nose or, less likely, he might accept your wildly ridiculous offer, and you'll end up with a hole in your pocket and a horse you may not want.

'You've got to be a fair judge of the price of an animal before you

Many of the horses at Ballinasloe are bought for children as an introduction to riding.

can even ask the price of the seller, and you've got to have enough in your pocket to pay for her.'

In reality the situation never arises, because everybody on the field knows exactly how much every horse is worth. The knack is to cut the price down gradually.

'If a man asked ten thousand pounds, you can't offer three. You can't make light of a man's animal no matter what he thinks she's worth. If he thinks she's worth the money then that's up to him. You just have to walk away, after all you can't buy every horse at the fair.'

Bruce Kelly has much experience of buying and selling horses.

He used to hunt regularly until work commitments stopped him. He reckons that the dealers would know instantly if somebody was inexperienced.

'They would be able to spot straight away if somebody came along who couldn't see the faults that they could see . . . there's a lot of that going on, but amongst the dealers themselves it would be very difficult to pass a dud.'

The beauty of Ballinasloe is that you can never quite be sure of what you're getting and how much you should be paying for it. This is the sort of fair where a complete novice could come and buy a horse for a few hundred pounds and discover that the horse he had bought turned out to be a top showjumper in a couple of years time.

It is quite possible to buy a horse for about fifteen hundred pounds and as a youngster, take it away, train it and get vastly more for it the next year. The risk is that the horse may not perform well, in which case you'd be lucky to get back what you paid for it.

There is also the possibility that a buyer could come to Ballinasloe with a couple of thousand pounds, and by careful buying and selling-on during the course of the fair could leave at the end of the first weekend a couple of hundred pounds richer, without having to find a home for a horse. Because the fair operates as a true market, with prices fluctuating all the time, it is possible, through good judgement and a lot of luck, to spot a good horse, buy it cheap at the beginning of the fair and then sell it again on the Monday.

'I've seen horses change hands here three or four times in one day,' says a buyer from Northern Ireland. 'They'd start off at six hundred pounds and go right up to fifteen hundred pounds. There are people who come here to buy with the intention of taking something home to keep; I buy to re-sell again. If you've bought well you can make a small profit, about fifty or sixty quid.'

There is a general rule, however, that the longer you wait the better the price will be if you're buying. This would tend to work against the speculators, as the prices are going down rather than up. One horse may start out on the Sunday morning with an asking price of four thousand pounds, and by the Monday afternoon that will be down to two and a half thousand. The trick is to find a

high-quality horse near the start of the show and pay a good price for it.

The best prices tend to be for the showjumpers, and this is where the lunging ring is so important. The buyers will get a chance to see the horse in action and judge the sort of price they think they ought to be paying. It is often more difficult to sell a cheap horse than it is to sell an expensive one. People will happily pay money for quality.

The lunging competition is held on the Sunday of the first week, and the winning horse would be expected to fetch the top price on the field amongst the jumping horses. At a recent fair the horse which won the lunging went for about five thousand pounds. Most of the jumping horses will fetch between one thousand and four thousand pounds. Pedigree is important, and if the horse comes from a long line of jumpers then the price it will get is likely to be much higher.

As well as the lunging ring, jumps are often set up on the field itself to show the way the horse can move. A wooden pole on top of a pair of oil drums is the most usual. Young men ride, mostly bare-back, to show off these horses; like the lads with the travellers' horses they know no fear.

There are, however, some who believe that the lunging ring is a step in the wrong direction.

Pat Cash is one of them. 'There's too many railings now. When the Fair Green was open, you just saw a horse you liked, gave it a jump and bought it; now that there's the lunging ring you have to queue up and it takes much longer. If you have to queue up you don't get to see what's going on elsewhere and you might miss the chance of a sale.'

At one time most of the horses in the fair would have been Irish Draughts; this is not the case any more, but they are still common. They are rarely used now for working on the farms, but they are ideal for pulling loads, and they are especially useful where the ground is very heavy. In fact one of the few places where you might still see one at work is in a peat bog, hauling loads of dried peat out of the sodden ground. In the very centre of the bog, where the

Overleaf: 'Would you be interested in the mare or the foal, sir?'

turf is actually being cut, donkeys will be used to haul the turf as far as the tracks where the larger horses will take it over.

Many people buy the Draught to use for hunting or simply for pleasure. There is a saying that a farmer doesn't feel that he's got a proper farm unless he has a horse on it. There are many farmers who keep a horse, and in particular an Irish Draught, simply for the link with the traditions of the past. There are many people in Ireland who are just enthusiasts for the breed. The Irish Draught is not nearly as common as it used to be, but at least it has survived.

There are a few donkeys sold at Ballinasloe Fair, although there seem to be fewer and fewer each year. In the days when there were horses at work on the farms most farmers would have a donkey, using it to pull a little donkey cart. People buy them now for children, as pets or as an introduction to riding.

The biggest horses on the Fair Green tend to be the large half-breds which are used for hunting. There are few obstacles which would be too big for them to cope with—after all, they are usually at least 16.2 to 16.3 hands high and are best ridden by experienced riders. Hunting does not seem to face the same sort of opposition in Ireland that it does in England. In Ireland it is accepted as a part of the country way of life. Another big difference between hunting in Ireland and in England is that in Ireland it is something which is done by anyone who is competent enough to ride a horse well enough not to kill themselves chasing the fox. There isn't the kind of social status attached to hunting. The horse, in Ireland, is a great leveller. It is mainly the farmers who hunt and there is no great ceremony—they just get on and do it. One of the bar managers in the town admits that in this part of the world the fox leads a fairly safe life. The hunters are out to give their horses a good bit of exercise and killing foxes comes second.

Ballinasloe Fair is popular with people who go hunting. The Galway Blazers, the North Tipperary, the East Galway hunts are often well represented. It is a great occasion for meeting old friends, says one former huntsman.

Each year a different type of horse will be the best seller at Ballinasloe. Perhaps it will be foals, perhaps yearlings. Sometimes

At seventeen hands high the hunters are the most imposing horses at the fair.

the half-breds fetch good prices, sometimes it's the three-quarter-breds. Usually the best prices are paid for pure-bred Irish Draughts. Pure-bred stallions are still pretty rare despite the breeding subsidy given by the Irish government for the Irish Draught. One horse which always does very well is the hunter aged between five and seven. This is an ideal age because the horse will be well trained, but still have the potential to be used for hunting for many years to come. Three-year-old horses are never as easy to sell as five-, six- or seven-year-olds.

The reason why the half-breds are so common is that the breeders don't like their horses to be too pure. The problem with Thoroughbreds is that if the bloodlines become too close, with excessive inbreeding the horses can become very highly strung and difficult to manage; by breeding with a Draught mare some fresh blood is injected. If they want the horses to work or jump they don't want a horse which is going to be neurotic. Both the Irish Draught and the Connemara ponies are blessed with a good nature. They are docile working animals who do what is asked of them, and with a good grace. If a strain of horses becomes too pure, that good grace goes. One farmer compares it to the situation with humans.

'If you're well bred then you can just sail through life, but a fat man, who hasn't got good looks, he has to work hard on his good nature to make people like him and to get on. It's the same with horses, the rougher the breeding the better the nature.'

In the middle of the field stands Seamus Campbell. Like many of the breeders he has been coming to Ballinasloe since he was shorter than a Shetland pony. He has two mares and two foals with him. His father has several more horses.

'I'm selling the foals for a lady back home. She wants to keep this black mare here who's in foal again, but she wants rid of the two foals. The father of these two foals is a great showjumper who's really well known around here.'

An old farmer is looking at the horse that Seamus is holding.

'She's a good breeding mare . . . I wouldn't buy it myself, I've got several breeding mares . . . I'm trying to look at the prices. There's a filly foal over there been sold for seventeen hundred.'

Seamus says, 'I saw a man here last year who had three foals and he was offered £6,000 for the three of them; eventually he took

£2,300 for one of them. He's got the two yearlings back this year and he'll be lucky if he gets £3,000 for the two of them; he should have let them go last year. You should sell them as foals.'

It's all a matter of when to buy and when to sell. The old farmer recounts how he knows a man from Sligo who bought a foal at the previous year's fair for £1,000, and has just managed to sell it on for £2,000.

'It costs a lot to take them for the year,' says Seamus. 'You have to feed them and hope that nothing goes wrong with them . . .'

Standing a short way down from Seamus and his father is a farmer from Loughrea, about 20 miles away. He has a half-bred Draught mare with him, and a foal standing next to her.

'It's a cross between a Thoroughbred and an Irish Draught. The most popular colour for the Irish Draught is grey. The half-bred off a Draught mare is one of the most popular horses in the country. Today's a bit slow, money seems to be scarce, but the good horses are going. It's the foal which I'm after selling, I'd hope to get about £1,500. I got £1,800 for her sister last year.'

Having the mother with the foal serves two purposes. Firstly, it helps to keep both of them calm, but more importantly it gives the potential buyer a good idea of the kind of horse he can expect the foal to grow into. There's an old saying that a man should always look at his potential mother-in-law to see what his wife will be like in 25 years' time. The same applies to horses.

The horses are all paid for in cash, whether it's the farmers or the travellers who are buying and selling. It's quite common to see large wads of notes being brought out and handed over. For large transactions bankers' drafts are used. These can be kept safe until they are needed and then changed for cash at the banks in the town.

By the end of the afternoon, as darkness starts to fall, the dealing subsides. The fair is exhausting, for the horses, the sellers and especially the onlookers. If it is wet and cold the Fair Green can be a miserable place to be, and in the wind and the rain there are fewer deals done. People start to wander away about six o'clock, taking their horses home for the night or off to local fields to be kept for the following day. Farmers on the outskirts of town will rent out their land to sellers and buyers alike.

Some buyers will buy a couple of horses on the first day of the

fair and then go back for more on the Monday, in the hope that the price may have fallen. Even as the Fair Green slips into darkness there will still be a few deals going on. As long as there is someone around who is willing to buy, there'll be someone who's willing to sell.

One of the reasons why Ballinasloe Fair is so popular is that it cuts out the middle man. The farmers who sell the horses also breed them. They don't make a lot of money on their animals at the best of times and by coming here they keep all the profit for themselves. It's a case of the breeder selling directly to the buyer. If they put the horse into an auction mart they would have to pay the commission on the sale. It is also likely that the buyers would end up paying more for the same horse.

Not everybody comes to buy or sell; hundreds just come to watch, enthusiasts who love to see good horses. Sean isn't in the market for a stallion, but he can still appreciate a good horse. People stand and watch, trying to guess the worth of each horse. They might stand and dream as well—of owning a small piece of land and the finest jumping horse this side of the Irish Sea to keep on it.

'It's nice to see a horse that you have looked at the year before and see how he's come on since then. There's one horse which we were watching last year and we thought he'd do well. He has, he's come on quite well, he's still young and he'll do a lot better.'

Bruce Kelly used to keep a stallion in the days when he had time to go hunting.

'I saw a lot of yearlings and two-year-olds and three-year-olds by the stallion that I used to have, up there. It was great to see all these foals by Whitehall Bridge making good money.'

Bruce also tells a tale which proves that there is a lot of difference between the price which is quoted for a horse and that which is actually paid.

'I had a foal by Whitehall Bridge which I had heard had gone for £5,000, so I went up to the Fair Green to find the man who'd bought him, and to have a look to see how he'd come on. When I actually got to the man I found he'd only paid £1,500 for him.'

Most of the buyers are highly skilled at breaking horses in and training them up. They can tell from the temperament of a foal whether or not it will come good. The training takes weeks of hard

There aren't many donkeys sold at Ballinasloe, but they are a favourite with the children.

work, mainly involving the lunging rein, teaching the horse to get used to a bridle and bit. Then the horse is taught to cope with a saddle and then, after weeks of patient work, it is ridden for the first time.

Some horses become broken within a matter of days, some never get used to the idea of having a rider on their backs. There seems to be some kind of feeling that the horses which pass through Ballinasloe are more intelligent and better for bringing on than other horses. The truth is probably that the buyers know the sellers and they know which horses are likely to turn out for the best. Horses will be bought and broken and back at Ballinasloe by the following October.

One of the stewards on the organising committee has his own horse standing on the field waiting for offers.

'Most of these breeders don't do much with the horses once

they've been born, so you'd get a young horse who's a bit wild and buy him to break in. These farmer-breeders don't develop the horses to their full potential, and that's half the fun . . . buying a horse in the rough and getting the full potential out of him.'

This is the case with the horse he is holding.

'He's a yearling, a great mover, but he's a bit "unfurnished", I would say. I bought him a couple of months ago and he wasn't in good enough condition . . . but he'll make a good showjumper with time. He needs to be a bit older. If I get a bit of profit on him I'll sell him, if I don't I'll hold onto him, that's the way it is.'

The horse was entered into the showjumping in the arena next to the Fair Green. It won its class but the steward is having no joy with selling him. He sold a couple of foals the previous week and has some money to buy a horse.

'I might get a hunter for the winter, more for my daughter than myself. She does a lot of the work with the horses for me, so I want to get her something to keep her interested.'

This particular seller has more than 30 years' experience of dealing horses at Ballinasloe, and in that time he has learnt a trick or two. Lesson number one: don't make your horse look too good.

'People are not inclined to come up to the horse which is very well turned out. They look for something which is a bit rough and ready. If a horse is too well turned out, and too well trained, there's only one direction he can go in, and that's down. With a horse which is rough there's all the potential to bring out.'

Of course most of the horses are already broken. Certainly that is the case with anything which is more than a year old. The skill is taking a horse which has been broken and bringing out its full potential. Some people actually ride their horses onto the Fair Green—after all it does give you something to sit on while you're trying to achieve a sale.

The smallest horses are the tiny Shetland ponies. They are not particularly common at Ballinasloe. At the most they are no more than about nine hands high when they are fully grown. The kids love them and the sellers find that by putting a small child on the back of the horse it gives the thing added 'cuteness'. Shetland ponies might seem like the perfect animals for children, but like all horses, particularly if they are pure bred, they can occasionally turn nasty.

It's wrong to assume that just because a horse is small and looks cute, it is going to be docile. There's many a fair-goer who has suffered a kick from the hooves of these tiny beasts.

Ballinasloe Fair has survived over the years for one simple reason. People love horses, and if there is no need for them to work the land then they will buy them for pleasure. The Shetland ponies are seen as an ideal introduction to riding for young children, and handled correctly that is just what they are.

Every fair has its characters, and at Ballinasloe Francie Larkin is one of them. He lives about 12 miles away and hasn't missed a fair for over 40 years. He has an Irish Draught mare and foal to sell.

Although most of the horses are Irish Draughts, half-breds or three-quarter-breds, there are a few Shetland ponies for sale.

The Larkin brothers, Tommy and Francie.

'There's plenty of customers but no money . . .'

Francie and his brother Tommy live in an old seventeenth-century farmhouse which has changed little since the time that it was built.

'The buyers aren't prepared to pay what I want . . . a couple of years ago there'd be no problem getting two thousand for a mare, now you can't get sixteen hundred.'

He remembers the days when the travellers came in real caravans.

'Loads of canvas, none of those mobile home things . . . We've seen terrible . . . terrible changes . . . in the old days the horses were sold on the street and they were heavier, now they're a lighter class of horse for the showjumping.'

Francie remembers how the Irish Draught started to die out.

'They've only come back in the last three years to what they should be . . . nice bone, a nicely shaped horse . . . this one here is the real thing, she's got good bone and she can feed a foal.'

When Francie started coming to the fair foals would sell for about £35—that was back in the late 1930s . . . Now the price for a foal would be in excess of £1,400.

'There were no horses selling for a hundred pounds at that time. The good thing about this fair is that because there are no auctioneers and times for the sales you've got the time to look.'

About a quarter of the horses will go abroad, either to the United Kingdom or even farther afield. Buyers from Sweden, France and Germany regularly come to Ballinasloe to buy new blood for their stables. Some of the horses sold at Ballinasloe have made it as far as the United States. The prices might seem high, some years, to the English buyers, but for people living in Europe and the States most of the horses on sale are real bargains. Even with the cost of transporting them back home, they can still be good value. In Sweden the horses are used for cross-country 'hacking', riding across rough terrain with plenty of obstacles to jump. They race across country, along private roads and special routes laid out for the riders.

Of course the tradition of coming from far away is nothing new—wasn't that just what the buyers from the armies of Europe were doing in the last century, when they came to Ballinasloe for their military needs?

Many of the buyers have their children with them. Some of the children will be the eventual owners of the horse, others are just learning the trade of horse-dealing and horse-breaking. They don't need much persuading to learn. Children are not scorned here, they are encouraged. They watch their parents and learn what to look for in a horse, they get a feel for the atmosphere of the fair and the way that the deals are done. In years to come it will be these children who will keep the tradition alive.

Monday comes with bright sunshine, a stiff breeze and a thousand sore heads from the revelry of the night before.

Seamus Campbell has not sold any of his horses.

'We went up to Hayden's Hotel last night, but we couldn't get in . . . so we went off to Egan's.'

The night has taken its toll on many of the sellers and buyers.

Monday tends to be a shorter day on the Fair Green. Most people start to leave about four or five o'clock in the afternoon. If your

horse hasn't sold by then there's little chance that you will manage to sell it at all. Early in the day the selling tends to be quite brisk, with breeders wanting to clear out their horses before heading home. Many of the buyers and sellers will be back the following weekend for the foals. Once again the Fair Green will be covered with horseflesh and buyers seeking out bargains.

What makes Ballinasloe Fair so special is its diversity. Because it is such a large fair there really is a horse here for everyman, whether it's a hundred pounds for a foal or ten thousand for one of the travellers' horses. The variety attracts the crowds and the crowds in turn attract more horses. Of course you might spend less money buying your horse through the classified advertisements in the local paper, but somehow it wouldn't be nearly so much fun. As the evening draws on the sky turns a startling red colour. As the light fades the horses head for home, some for pastures new, others back to breed again. The farmers head off for their hunts, or their firesides, to a winter of wondering whether it will be their horse which becomes the talk of the fair next year.

'A keen eye can often spot a bargain . . .'

CHAPTER FIVE

The Travelling People

On the grassy mound leading up to the church there's a village within a town. Ragged children play and fight and ride horses with a sense of fearlessness that makes grown men wince. Dogs chase each other around, men curse at the dogs and the women curse the men. Some of the dogs are tied to bright, shining trailers, some sleep and some just don't care. Fires burn next to caravans and battered Ford Transits. The camp fires are a link with the traditions of the past. By night these fires ring with talk and stories, and gossip.

Every year the travellers come to this hill by the church. They bring their families and dogs and trailers and vans. In the vans are all kinds of odds and sods—horse 'tack', tools, welding gear, even the occasional kitchen sink. Tied to the van there might be a pony, and next to the pony there might be a small boy. They learn at a very early age how the man becomes the master of the beast. Horses are not the only beasts, there are other animals wandering round.

The dogs bark at the ponies and cower at the boys. The boys cower at the men and the men cower at the women. The men do deals and talk horses, the women go out selling charms or predict the future. When they are at work, selling their visions of the future, they wear skirts slit well up the thigh and often they have lace in their jet-black hair. The lads have wide-eyed grins, often minus a couple of teeth, no sense of fear and are seldom seen without a riding whip in their hands. And the men . . . like the farmers some are dressed up to the nines, while some just look scruffy and rough.

Ballinasloe Fair is one of the highlights in the social calendar for Ireland's travellers. Some people call the travellers 'Gypsies', but most are not. There are a few 'true' Gypsies amongst them but most come from families who have travelled around Ireland all their lives. True Gypsies are a separate race, Romany people. They have their

own looks and their own language. It is thought that Romanies may have originally come from India, which would account for the darkness of their skin.

Where there are horses it is a proven fact that there will be travelling people to go with them. They come in their hundreds, in their vans and jeeps and lorries, with dirty-faced children and their dogs. For them Ballinasloe is, in the literal translation of the town's name, a meeting place, a coming together. The trailers shine in the sun, the four-wheel-drive jeeps bristle with mobile phones and hi-tech stereos, but the camp fires are still there, as are the customs and the traditions, often going back thousands of years.

At the root of this sort of life is the need to travel, very closely followed by the need to do deals, and especially buy and sell horses. There are travellers and Gypsies all over Europe and those who come to Ballinasloe Fair are part of a vast extended family, stretching all the way from Russia to the southern tip of Spain. This family gathering is drawn together by a love of horses, and the opportunity to make some money. The fairs which are held in various places around Ireland during the summer months are the landmarks on the social map for the travellers. They will meet up at Puck, or Spancil Hill, and then go their separate ways, meeting again at Ballinasloe. Some of the fairs are for trading horses, others for palmistry, others just for general dealing. There is no set pattern to the way that they travel around, they just go where they instinctively feel there's a living to be made.

'It's what we like doing,' one of the men tells me. 'We know where to go and when to go. There's no restrictions on you. If you get fed up with one place you move on to the next.'

Although they come to sell and show off their horses, they are also here for all the important rituals which go with families. With a group of people who spend most of their lives on the road an event like Ballinasloe Fair is the one chance they get each year to meet and be with people of their own kind. And in a sense it is one big family, or a series of big families who are all related to one another, through marriage.

Many of the travellers only move around for part of the year; some are very wealthy indeed, some live in near poverty. Some of them own houses as well as the trailers, the caravans in which they

travel around. A lot of them own land where they can keep their horses, particularly in the winter.

In the old days they travelled the country in wooden caravans, the canvas wagons which still exist in smaller numbers today. People have fond memories of those caravans arriving in the town. Historian Dermot Connolly remembers the 1930s.

'The nicest memory I have of the fair is seeing the old-style Gypsy caravans coming into the town, the barrel caravans with the canvas roofs. They used to have the most wonderful fretwork on them, and the most beautiful decorations, and then there were brass buckets and jugs hanging from the shafts and on the back of the

A traveller and his grandson break for lunch.

caravans. They had beautiful horse brasses too, polished to the nines. And in those days we welcomed them, we knew they were tough, but we still welcomed them because we knew they meant no harm.'

If the men were tough the women were tougher still. The chances were that in those days, if there was a fight between two of the travellers it would be the women who were doing the fighting, and usually in the street. Amongst the travellers it is the women who hold the community together, even though their lives can be relentlessly hard at times.

In the old days they were tinkers, now they are travellers; whichever term is used they are not generally popular. They have always been regarded as outside the mainstream of society. In Hitler's Germany the Romany people were rounded up as being racially impure and put into concentration camps. They are not very popular with many of the people at Ballinasloe, who see them as a nuisance and blame them for any crimes that are committed during the fair, and they also get accused of making the place look untidy.

Others see them as exploiting the social security system and the benefits system to the full. 'Urban cowboys' is one of the phrases used about them. One man says that if he ever wanted to know anything about the way the social security system works, he wouldn't go to an advice centre, he'd go up onto the Fair Green and ask the travellers. Many people say that the travellers who come to Ballinasloe Fair these days don't mingle with the rest of the people in the town in the same way as they might have done 50 or 60 years ago. That may be because of the feelings of the people in the town and the hostility they sometimes face, or it might be that they truly feel outside society. But out of adversity comes pride.

'People think we're no good, but just look in here.' Inside the trailer everything is spotless. The men with their rough hands find pride in the horses, pride in their breeding and pride in the way they race their sulkies. For the women the pride is in their homes.

Despite the reluctance of many people in the town to welcome the travellers, there is still a degree of tolerance which would not be found elsewhere. They are a part of the fair, and whatever problems they may or may not bring, it is accepted that the fair wouldn't be the same without them. In a typical display of resourcefulness,

a couple of years ago the Town Council decided that if the travellers were here to stay then they might as well help to fund the running of the event, and they are now charged for bringing their trailers onto the site.

Many travellers feel that they *are* sometimes unfairly treated; they say that travelling is their way of life and they resent people who want to make them settle down.

One traveller woman describes how she and her husband have a house, a very expensive house, but they only spend about three months of the year there. She says the main reason they bought it was that it had a large piece of land and stables with it. Ideal for the horses, but the trailer is her home. She was born on the road, met her husband on the road and all her children were born on the road.

For many of the families the trailers are both their homes and the workplace where the women tell fortunes and read palms. This is what brings in the money to do the deals with the horses. A typical trailer will have room to sleep a family of at least four, probably six and often eight. The beds stow away during the day to make seats around one end of the trailer. At the other end is a fully fitted kitchen with a gas stove. Most of the trailers are absolutely spotless inside.

'People think we're dirty, but we're not . . .' says another woman as she shows off her home. 'I've always kept this place absolutely sparkling, it's as good as anybody's house.'

There are also the bits and pieces which mark out normal family life—photographs of children and grandchildren in frames, shiny trinkets and pieces of porcelain picked up on their travels.

By contrast the travellers' camp itself looks messy, but then the whole of the fair is messy: the amount of paper and plastic sheeting being blown around the Fair Green after the horses have left proves that.

The biggest complaint about the travellers is that they seem to bring trouble with them. That may be true but it is likely that with so many people gathered in one place at the same time there would be trouble anyway, with or without the travelling people. In the town there is a distinct air of nervousness during the week of the fair. It is quite common to see a couple of large men standing outside

the doorways of shops when the fair is at its height. There are some bars where the travellers are not welcome and every year there are rumblings that the fair is getting out of hand. A lot of this is unfair on the travellers. Quite often the people responsible for the crimes are not travellers at all. The Garda say that frequently groups of lads will come from Dublin, usually in a stolen car, run out of food, petrol and money and start to steal. In one recent incident an old lady was tied up in her own home and robbed. The thieves who broke in threatened to set fire to the house.

One woman traveller admits that they do sometimes cause trouble, but she says that most are well behaved.

'Sometimes travellers don't do the right thing, they get a bit of hassle. We'd rather have the bit of hassle than be stuck in the one place. We've never been treated bad since we've been in Ireland, and I've travelled all over Ireland, from fair to fair and I've never got much hassle. The people like us to be fair with them, and we are fair with them and they're fair with us.'

A steward from the organising committee admits that the travellers do pose problems.

'We don't actively encourage them. Their caravans take up a lot of space on the green, but we're learning to live together and for the last few years there hasn't been any trouble.'

It's not just Irish travellers who come to Ballinasloe. There's a large contingent who come across from England every year. Some are 'real' travellers who spend their entire lives on the road in the same way that the Irish travellers do; others live on permanent sites, although most of them still live in trailers. They make their money in many different ways, although almost all involve dealing of some sort or another. Many of the English travellers are scrap dealers, and most of them are very good at it. It is not unusual to visit a travellers' site in England where there is a Mercedes parked outside the trailer.

The English travellers tend to come and stay in the town's hotels if they have plenty of money; if they haven't they stay with relatives on the site next to the church.

They come across in groups, almost exclusively men. There's the

There might be tons of rubbish outside, but inside many of the trailers are spotless.

Yorkshire lads, the Durham lads and the 'boys from South London'.

The 'Boys from South of the River' are no fools. They size you up and they know pretty quickly if a man is not to be trusted. They didn't make their money by doing bad deals. Whether it's a car or a horse, they know what they're getting, at least most of the time they do. For them, too, it is a social occasion: they are part of the family. They come back here year after year to see their mates, to talk about old times, and how life used to be. Their fathers would have known the fathers of the Irish travellers, and they share the same love of the horses and the money.

The travellers, English and Irish, come to Ballinasloe to deal, to make money and to meet. In that order. For many of them this fair is the biggest opportunity of the year to make their living. In the old days they were mainly tinkers, as well as being horse-dealers. The tradition of the tinker lives on but there are many ways that the modern traveller can find to make his fortune. They still sell lucky heather, although this is by and large a mere sideline for the children and the elderly. The men do a lot of trading in scrap and machinery, selling direct from their vans or from their trailers. The goods vary, from a portable cement-mixer to manhole covers. They spread their wares out on the ground and usually leave one of the teenagers in charge. Unlike the rest of society there is, within the travelling community, a respect for age. The youngest children will be put to work, but they do fairly menial tasks. Older children are left to look after some of the smaller animals, and then the teenagers act as the stockmen for the family. By the time they reach the age of thirteen or fourteen they will be able to ride as well as any professional jockey, and they will know more than most about how to look after and manage horses. The older people within the community are respected for their experience and wisdom, not abandoned to live out their days alone; they are as much a part of the family as anybody else.

The men and the women in travelling communities have very distinct roles, but that does not mean that they are unequal. It's often the case that the men are frightened of the women. The men deal and rear the horses, but this is a matriarchal society. The women control the families, and often with a fist of iron.

'I let him deal the horses,' explains one woman. 'I wouldn't know

An evening around a bonfire is one of the ways that the travellers keep in touch with the traditions of the past.

where to start. But when it comes to the family or the home, now that's a different matter.

'Ballinasloe is the best fair in Ireland for the travellers for selling. There's all kinds of travellers come here. You meet people who you haven't seen for years, they all meet up here.'

Travellers tend to have very large families. It is not unusual for the older women to have twenty grandchildren and several great-grandchildren.

By the time the young men are learning to ride bareback, the

teenage girls are learning to read the cards or the tea leaves or the art of palmistry. This is how travellers make most of their money when they come to Ballinasloe for the fair.

Along the edge of the site the soothsayers' trailers line up, ready to receive custom.

'Grace my palm with silver and I shall tell all' is the slogan on the side of one of the caravans.

At the height of the fair there will be a line of about seven or eight people, almost certainly all women, queuing up outside the door of each caravan. They wait patiently to hand over five pounds to hear what the future has in store for them. Ireland is a very spiritual society, and people believe in the powers of mystics. The lines on the palm of the hand tell a trained reader about the past and the personality of the person. Different lines signify different aspects of a person's life, such as their health, their love life and how long they can expect to live.

Long queues build up outside the caravans of the palm readers and fortune-tellers.

The Church certainly doesn't approve, but then there is a lot that the Church doesn't approve of. The travellers have to work hard at the Tarot cards and the palmistry at Ballinasloe. It is the last big event of the year and the money they make at the summer fairs has to last them though the lean winter months.

Outside the trailers there are boards or posters boasting of their supernatural powers:

'Madam Leona Boswell . . . True Romany Gypsy . . . Fortunes told, past, present and future . . . Crystal Ball and Palm Readings . . . Come and be amazed' or

'Madam Star . . . Seventh Generation Palmistry . . . Ask any Question . . . Satisfaction guaranteed.'

Many of the women wear traditional dress, with much black and lace and intricately embroidered tops. At least they do for the sake of the readings; at other times jeans and T-shirts are more common.

'I read the palm, the crystal, the mind and the character,' explains one fortune-teller. She is in her fifties, with several grandchildren to her name. She wears the traditional lace-frilled dress for the palm readings, wellies and a wax jacket for the horses.

'It gives people the peace of mind sometimes, puts them on the right path, makes them a little bit more content when they go out than when they come in.'

She tells them a little of the past and a little bit about the present, and she says that if she sees something bad in the future she will handle it as delicately as she can.

'We don't like to give them too much anxiety.'

These 'Gypsy' travellers are not the only travelling people who come to Ballinasloe. In recent years New Age travellers have started coming to the town for the fair. They are mostly youngsters who have decided to opt out of conventional society. They are referred to by the townsfolk as 'smellies', on account of the fact that they rarely wash. They tend to live in a collection of Transit vans, and usually make camp on the edge of town.

The term 'New Age' comes from some of the alternative life-styles they've adopted, mysticism, astrology and a belief that the earth is at the dawn of a new age as determined by the stars.

They come with dreadlocks, sometimes with young children in tow, and are not much liked by most people. Like the travellers

Gypsy Madam Gray comes to Ballinasloe every year.

they are accused of causing trouble and being responsible for crime. Maybe they are just an easy target; it is quite likely that they will disappear in the near future, to be replaced by some new kind of travelling people who have decided that they want to live their lives outside conventional society. Society doesn't like outsiders, people who are different and who choose to live in a different way. The early Christians were another group to find this out, to their cost. The New Age travellers sell trinkets, a bit of jewellery and do face painting to earn some money for petrol and food. They feel a sense of empathy with the traditional travellers, they feel that they are hounded in the same sort of way.

This might look like a traditional caravan, but the body is mounted on the chassis of a Ford pick-up truck.

in rambus fortuna

The way of life for the travellers is changing slowly, like the fair itself. The free and easy life is disappearing, and the state wants to take a much greater interest in what they do. Whereas in the past they could just pitch their trailers by the roadside, now they are encouraged towards official sites. They make use of all the modern comforts, heating, electricity and four-wheel drive. Although there are a few of the old horse-drawn 'barrel' caravans around, their numbers get fewer and fewer. These days the horse-drawn caravans are more likely to be used by the 'New Age travellers'. There is one example of the old and the new being combined, though. One traveller has the top half of his old barrel caravan put onto a Ford pickup chassis.

Some of the youngsters are abandoning this way of life. Some would prefer to settle down in a house rather than a mobile home. Some would rather have jobs than trade or deal, but the travelling way of life will survive. The young men with their missing teeth, grubby hands and dare-devil horsemanship wouldn't miss this for the world. There may be more and more pressures on the travellers, but they still feel that they can come and go as they please. The young women are happy enough, by and large, to follow their mothers into the palmistry and the fortune telling. A lot of the marriages are still arranged, by a 'matchmaker', and many of the younger travellers accept this. The marriage is not between two people but between two families. Their rituals and rites of passage are still very important to them. Baptisms and funerals are major events, and the graves of the dead are treated with great reverence. The old meets the new and each finds an accommodation in the way that they live.

The travelling folk are the last to go, rolling out of town a few days after everybody else. They leave their place on the hill for another year and go off to pastures new, trading, dealing and living life the way they want to.

The great thing about Ballinasloe is that it is an event which accepts that some people may choose to live their lives in this way. Many people may not like either the traditional Gypsy travellers or the New Age travellers, but there is an underlying acceptance that they exist. Somehow the fair wouldn't really be the same without them, and a lot of the people who love the fair realise this.

CHAPTER SIX

The Travellers' Horses

Travellers' horses don't have the same smooth lines as racehorses, they don't have the cute looks of the ponies and they don't have the awe-inspiring presence of the hunters, but these are the horses which make the Ballinasloe Fair such an interesting place. Some of them are Cobs, others are half-breds, almost all are black and white, or brown and white. Amongst the travellers the black and white horses are the most valuable; the brown and whites are popular too but worth less money. For them the horse is the ultimate status symbol. They have two sorts of horse which they buy, the heavy horses and the trotters.

'Some people would have a Rolls-Royce, but I'd much rather have a good black and white horse,' says one of the dealers.

In this community a man is judged by his horse, and particularly by the price he pays for it. Price is everything and this is what makes these horses so different from the horses that the farmers breed and buy and sell. The most that you'd pay for a hunter or an Irish Draught is about five or six thousand pounds; the travellers would pay vastly more than that for the right horse.

'We don't work the heavy horses, at least not nowadays. They're pets. Some people race them but I don't. I just love to look at a black and white horse . . . it's what I live for.'

That buyer is typical of the travellers who come to Ballinasloe. Phillip Lee is a car dealer, across from London. He comes from a family of travellers, but has stopped travelling to settle down. His accent is strongly London. His mate Joe Buckley has a Kent accent, he's from Dartford.

'Some people have cats and dogs, others keep goldfish, I just love

Overleaf: The travellers sell their horses by the steps in the south-west corner of the Fair Green.

black and white horses. Some people would look at a pretty woman and feel something inside, with us it's the horses. I'd rather be here on this field looking at these horses than be in Spain,' says Joe.

'The pleasure's in having them and breeding them. You see them give birth to a foal and you watch that foal develop. If it does anything special you can say, "That was my horse"; if it makes a bad one you can say, "It wasn't my horse!"'

But it hasn't always been the black and white horses which are popular with the travellers. Sometimes different types of horse are fashionable. Joe explains that a few years ago Shires were all the rage, and then another time it would be brown and whites or spotted horses.

'It comes in and out of fashion like clothes.'

There's always a strong contingent from London and the South-East of England. They go to all the English fairs such as Appleby and Stow and then come across to Ballinasloe which is, in effect, the last big horse sale of the season.

Other English travellers who come from the North-East and from Yorkshire to buy horses here want different types of animals. Joe and Phillip are after the 'heavy' horses but the buyers from Northern England are after 'trotting' ponies. In those parts of the country they race on the roads, without, of course, the permission of the authorities. Sometimes they bring horses with them to Ballinasloe to sell. It may well be worth their while to pay the extra cost of the transport to bring their horses to Ireland because they could get a better price here than they would do in England.

It's a sort of sport, a form of gambling. The horse you buy might turn out to be worth a mint in a couple of years' time, or it may turn out to be completely worthless. Even the sellers don't really know what the potential of a horse is. As Joe Buckley says,

'You've got to take the good with the bad. Sometimes you might earn a hundred or a thousand quid, sometimes you don't. It's just a bit of pleasure for us.'

There are other buyers from Kent on the field. Fred Collins comes from Ashford. He's in his late forties and has been coming to Ballinasloe for more years than he cares to remember.

'I'm looking for a heavy-looking horse, something that's thick set, stocky-looking . . . and it has to be black and white. My mate Albert

Coates bought a black and white up there today, eighteen months old, paid five grand for it. It's getting more and more expensive every year. There are still some bargains, but you have to be quick about it, but I'm just after the black and whites, not the trotters.'

Another man in the party admits that the previous year he spent £32,000 on three black and white mares. They know what they are looking for. It is big, burly and beautiful, and if it breeds well it could make them a fortune.

On the other hand the group of buyers from Yorkshire are looking at some of the trotters. One of them, a tall man in his early 30s called Keith, has been coming to Ballinasloe every year for the past 15 years.

'The standard gets better and better every year, but prices keep getting higher and higher. I'm looking for something which will do about 38 miles per hour. They've got to have thin legs, perhaps a bit of hair around the hoof, but they must be fast.'

He admits that this isn't perhaps the best fair for the trotters.

'It's more for the thick horses, the heavy horses . . . but it is the best fair in the world.'

He calls his mate Harry over.

'Here's a man who's a breeder . . . !'

'I'm looking for a bit of fresh blood . . . I'm wanting to buy a stallion to take back home.'

He too bemoans the rising prices.

'The days are gone when you could come here and buy something really cheap. In the old days the farmers would bring really cheap horses to the fair and you could buy them up, take them home and bring them on. Now it's all down to professional breeders. Now the English have come over here expecting a better standard of horse and it's pushed the prices up. Some say the Englishman's mad.'

A small number of the travellers' horses will be put to work to earn their keep, but only those unfortunate enough to be at the bottom of the heap, socially. Many of the travellers who are in the scrap metal business, whether big-time or on a very small scale, keep horses and they send their men out on the rounds with flat carts behind. The carts and the horses are hired out to the men on a daily rate. They are paid according to how much scrap they collect, and the cost of the horse is taken out of that payment. Some of

these horses on the Fair Green will end up doing this thankless work. The 'totters' or 'tattymen' or 'rag and bone' men travel round the streets of the big cities collecting what scrap they can—old fridges, washing machines or just window fittings—pulled by the horses that nobody else wants. Often these might be a cross between a black and white and something smaller, such as a Connemara pony.

The 'heavy' travellers' horses are Cobs, distant cousins of the giant English Shires and Clydesdales, although as far as appearance

A trotting horse and sulky. Although this is a 'Black and White', there is very little hair around the hooves as there is with the heavy horses.

goes they are most closely related to the Welsh Cob. The travellers use them for breeding with the trotting ponies to add strength into the blood line. Like the Welsh Cob, these black and white horses have an appearance of leaning slightly forwards when they stand upright. They are mostly piebald, black and white, although the travellers do have a few black or brown horses. They have wild white manes and a shock of hair around the hooves which is known as the 'feather'. Occasionally a horse is born almost completely black, with just a small patch of white somewhere on its body or on the legs.

The look of a horse is very important. The mane and the feather are both points which any potential buyer would look at very closely—the better the 'feather' the more the horse is worth—and the sellers work hard on some of the better horses to make them more presentable. This can be difficult if the weather is wet, when any attempt to make the feather look white and bushy becomes pretty futile as the mud takes over. Ideally the hair should look long and silky. The best horses are scrubbed and washed, and sometimes their manes are put into plaits. Sawdust is used on the feather to help to get the dirt off. If it is a particularly special horse the best halter will be put on. But if it is wet and windy the horses look miserable: they gather themselves up against the rain and the buyers don't get to see them at their best.

In the old days, when the travellers used horse-drawn wagons, these would have been working animals; now they have little to trouble them other than being bred and bought or sold.

For the trotting horses it's different. They are bought for their speed, not their colour. They pull small carts called 'sulkies' behind them. These carts are extremely light, with tubular steel construction and bare seats similar to those that used to be found on tractors in the 1920s. They run on wheels much like those on bicycles. Sulkies are pulled by one horse with a single person sitting on the cart and were first used in harness-racing in the 1820s.

Trotting is very popular in many countries around the world, particularly in America and Australia where it is a professional sport with a status equal to that of horseracing. On professional tracks the carts are actually driven by riders wearing the same sort of 'silks' as jockeys. The horses, with the sulkies behind them, will complete

circuits on an oval track. The surface is usually covered with dirt rather than with grass and the tracks are about half a mile to a mile in circumference. Usually there are six horses in each race, and the races are regulated and run in the same sort of way as horse races. Although the first 'harness races' were held in the Netherlands in the mid-sixteenth century, it is now the United States where the really big money can be made on the professional circuit. This is the nearest modern equivalent to the chariot races held by the Romans.

The travellers do it slightly differently. They find a long, straight stretch of road, preferably in the middle of nowhere. They get some road-signs put out, close the road and divert the traffic. They then race one another to find the top horse and the best driver. Usually the races take place over four or five miles and the horses may reach speeds of up to 30 miles per hour. They don't race for vast prizes, but for the prestige of having a horse than can't be beaten. Where they make their money is on the bets which are taken on the outcome of the race. These are often in the region of several thousand pounds.

The horses used for trotting need to have a great degree of discipline to keep going at a trot, rather than breaking into a gallop. So when the horses are being driven up and down on the concrete strip next to the Fair Green the potential buyers are looking both for speed and at the way the legs move. It is almost like dressage—the better the action of the horse and the way that it moves, the higher the price it will fetch. In particular the buyer will be looking for a horse that lifts its leg up when it trots.

Not only the travellers use their horses for trotting: buyers come from England to buy trotting horses for legal track 'harness' racing. They are not fussy about the colour, just the quality of horse. They want something which has good stamina and also speed, for a reasonable trotting horse will be able to do about 26 or 27 miles per hour out on the road. Smaller half- or three-quarter-breds are the best horses here, combining the speed of a Thoroughbred with the stamina of an Irish Draught, or perhaps the strength and tough build of one of the 'black and whites'.

The horses are not only tested on the concrete strip. On the roads at the edge of town the carts race up and down, sometimes followed close behind by a van or a car full of men. They are 'clocking' the

The hair around the hooves is washed to make it fluffy and white. The better this hair, the more the horse is worth.

horse, using their speedometers to measure just how fast they can go.

Some of the best horses never even see the Fair Green. When it comes to horse-dealing the travellers take it very, very seriously. They will pay the earth for a good horse, and travel far and wide to get hold of one.

A Dublin dealer, Sean, describes what he is looking for.

'Good heavy butts, short thick horses with plenty of hair, and the right colour . . .'

'And about five hundred pounds . . .' his mate chips in.

'You'll not get many for that today,' Sean retorts. 'They have to be made right, there's a certain type of animal that we like.'

Usually the buyer will want to see the horse in action before he makes an offer. This is spectacular and at the same time terrifying.

A horse dealer rarely looks happy. This time it seems to have rubbed off on the horse!

It is also something about which the organisers are not very keen. This is the 'strip' on the western side of the Fair Green, Ballinasloe's very own 'death alley'.

The horse to be shown off will first of all be harnessed up and the 'sulkie' strapped on. The buyer will look at how the horse copes with being put into harness and having a cart attached. The seller, or more likely one of his sons, will then head off as fast as he can towards the end of the concrete corridor, whipping the horse hard

to make it go faster and faster; then, just at the last moment, he tugs at the reins and miraculously horse, cart and driver just manage to pull up short of the wooden boards.

The whole contraption is then turned round and headed straight back towards the crowds at the other end of the alley.

The railings which mark off the strip only go half the way down and the people at the 'steps' end tend to lean out to get a better view of what is happening. As the horse and the sulkie reach the steps there is another sharp tug on the reins, and again, miraculously, the whole lot just manages to pull up in front of the stone wall at the edge of the Fair Green. The horse and sulkie are turned again, and off the lad drives, cracking the whip to make the horse go faster and faster. The buyer will crouch down, stooping with his hands on his knees, watching . . . watching the way the horse moves, its attitude, the way it responds to the whipping, and how close it gets to the wooden wall before it slams the brakes on. Sometimes two sulkies will race each other down the strip, side by side or one just in front of the other. The lads on the back have absolutely no concept of fear. They might be young in years, but they know exactly how fast they can push the horses. The heavy horses are also ridden up and down the strip to show the way they move.

This is a place where you have to watch yourself. The carts are flashing past at a death-defying speed and there are people every way you look. 'Flashing' is the name given to this practice of showing off the horse.

Sometimes horses are brought down the steps as the sulkies are racing past on the strip; sometimes a horse in harness decides it's going to take off across the green or towards the market stalls at the southern end of the field, pursued by several of the travellers.

After a few runs up and down the horse will be pulled up for the buyer to inspect. He has a listen to the breathing, sees how much the horse is sweating and looks to see how alert it is.

Then it will be sent back, hurtling towards the lunging ring again with a fierce cry of 'Go-on now!' The lad on the back will make several more runs, with the buyer looking on intently.

Displays of horsemanship are stunning, and yet lurking in the background there is always the question of safety. People do unfortunately get hurt at Ballinasloe. At one recent fair a man was hit by

one of the sulkies as he ducked under the railings. He was dead before he reached hospital. People are quite often struck a glancing blow from the carts as they go past. At the height of the fair the corner where the travellers' horses are sold can be a frightening place. As well as the sulkies being run up and down there is a very large number of horses in a very small space.

Once the buyer is satisfied that the horse can perform he starts to talk prices with the seller.

'That's not a bad horse you've got there but I don't know about the price.'

'You'll not get a better one at that price.'

They form into a huddle. They may do a deal, or the buyer may just go away and think about it. They may meet up later that night and make a deal as the drinks go down. Usually quite a few people will be involved. As well as a tangler trying to bring the two parties together, there will be friends and supporters from both sides chipping in their opinion about how much the horse is or is not worth.

Most of the travellers look after their horses well, but sometimes you will see a horse being whipped or kicked. Sometimes this is excessive and people who come to Ballinasloe for the first time might find it a shock. Given the speed that the horses are raced down the concrete strip, and the number of horses in such a small area, it is remarkable that there are so few injuries to these animals.

The English travellers sell to each other as well as buying horses from the Irish. It is not unknown for an English seller to bring a horse all the way from Kent to Ballinasloe, only to sell it to a friend who lives just a few miles up the road in South London.

The horse will have been brought all the way here because he can get a better price for it at Ballinasloe. His mate would probably have tried to buy the horse back in England, but by bringing it across to Ireland the seller has the option of testing the market.

There is a fascinating relationship between the English dealers and the Irish travellers. The Irish want to sell their horses, but they are not too sure whether they want the English to buy them. The English come with a fistful of bankers' drafts and just one aim: to take back as many good horses as they can. The Irish travellers have two aims. One is to make as much money as possible from the fair,

the other is to stop the English from taking the best bloodstock back with them on the ferry. They guard their blood lines jealously.

'These men might have been breeding these animals for thirty or forty years, and the stock would have been passed down through their families from father to son. Their aim is basically to breed a really good horse, and then if they want to cash in and take twenty thousand they do so, but they don't like to see these good breeding horses leave the country.'

This doesn't mean that they wouldn't take their horses to England. Quite often a horse will be bought at Ballinasloe with the intention of working and training it over the winter and selling it on at the spring and summer fairs the following year.

'I'd be looking for a yearling for about six thousand,' one buyer tells me. 'I'd keep him over the winter and then next year take him across to Appleby Fair and sell him on. I'd just train him, not race him or anything. With a bit of luck he could fetch ten thousand pounds, perhaps.'

What he does not say is that the horse which will go to England would not be one of the finest, perhaps just better than average.

Some of the English dealers hit Ireland at least a couple of weeks before Ballinasloe begins. They don't always bring horses with them, but they bring a lot of money. It is not unknown for an English buyer to come across with a banker's draft in his back pocket for £100,000. Some of the English dealers try to get into the market ahead of the game. They know where to go, they know where the Irish sellers are travelling and they start buying. They get there first, spot the bargains and start the rumour mill working. The word gets back to England and other buyers start to lick their lips. Dealers who buy in advance can simply roll up at Ballinasloe on the Saturday and start selling, and because they have spent the past couple of weeks in Ireland they know the state of the market and the sort of prices that the horses are likely to fetch.

It's the prices that are the most remarkable thing about these horses—anything from £500 right up to £40,000 for a really good horse, with the right blood line and the right look about it.

The owner at the Jekyll and Hyde couldn't believe it one year when one of the English buyers came in asking to change some English money for Irish currency.

'Normally we're quite happy to do so. I asked him how much. £40,000 he said. Not a chance, said I.'

Most of the travellers' horses will change hands for between £5,000 and £20,000. Those that fetch more will be outstanding mares and stallions for breeding, horses with a proven reputation or outstanding markings. The more a man pays for a horse the more respect he has, but these buyers are no fools, there is a limit to the amount they will pay. The problems arise when one set of sellers decides that they are going to take a group of buyers for a ride. The buyers, particularly the English, have money to spend, but they are more than happy to go back empty-handed if they think they are being asked too much for a horse.

There are vintage years for the buyers and vintage years for the sellers. At the end of the 1980s there was a couple of years when the buyers thought that they were being asked far too much for the horses and they simply didn't buy any. A few of the buyers even stopped coming because they thought that prices had gone wild and would never fall again. By 1992 the prices had come down again. The sellers had been bitten: they were left with dozens of horses on their hands which they could not get rid of, and so the prices being asked became more sensible.

'They take us for mugs, but we're not,' complains one of the English buyers. 'I love the horses, but I have a limit to what I can afford to pay, and these guys have been asking silly prices. There just isn't anything which comes anywhere close to being worth it.'

Some years the standard of the horses is not very high. Ballinasloe comes towards the end of the fair and sales season and although it is the biggest horse fair in Europe, some of the best horses may have gone earlier in the year. Some breeders will sell early if they are offered a good price, but they are taking a risk. It might seem a good idea to sell your prize mare in July if you are offered several thousand pounds for it, but how do you know that you wouldn't be offered considerably more for it at Ballinasloe in October? On the other hand, if horses have not been selling well early in the season at the other fairs, then there will be more up for grabs in Ballinasloe. Supply exceeds demand, and if that happens this fair becomes a buyer's market.

Ballinasloe is also heavily dependent on the state of the economy

As the sun goes down there are still a few horses to be looked at on the Fair Green.

in England. In a recession horses may become a luxury that people cannot afford. It is thought that up to 50 per cent of the horses sold at Ballinasloe are bought by English buyers, whether they are travellers' horses or hunters and jumpers.

Some of the breeders don't come to Ballinasloe to sell, they just come to show off. After all, in a field where status and quality are all-important, in a field where some of the top breeders amongst the travellers are present, where better to be seen with your most prized possession?

'If you've got a Cob which is worth a lot of money it's nice to bring him, even if you're not going to sell him. It's nice to let people know that you have him.'

One of the finest sights in the fair is to see the travellers' horses being taken to the Fair Green early in the morning. They are brought

to Ballinasloe in large lorries which park on the edge of town. The horses are tethered by the roadside where the travellers camp, and in the mornings they are brought in batches of 20 or so down to the Fair Green. It is the job of the young lads to do this: one walks behind and another rides bareback on the leading horse.

By teatime on the first Saturday there's an indication of how the trade is going. Phillip Lee and Joe Buckley have had a chance to look at the horses and they like what they see, even if they are not so keen on the prices.

'Trade's very sharp, making plenty of money. Horses are changing hands there. I can't see anything going cheap today, though.'

Homeward bound. Travellers' horses head off for the night.

The dealers know long before the fair what sort of prices are going to be asked. This particular year the rumour beforehand was that prices would be high and because of that a lot of the English buyers have stayed away. In the event it turns out that their fears were justified, although the sellers are not getting it all their own way.

'The prices they're asking and the prices they're getting are two different things. They're asking stacks of money and getting half of what they're asking.'

Phillip is looking for a black and white mare. 'I'll know it when I see it. There's nothing come on the field today that I'd want.'

When the dream horse appears he will be ready. 'I've got a fifty grand banker's draft in my pocket, so if it's the right horse I can go up to that, but I can't find what I want yet. You've got to come over here to find good things and you've got to expect to pay for them, but the things that they've got here today simply aren't worth that sort of money.'

For these men, and many others on the Fair Green, it is a case of no expense spared. Joe has brought his young son.

'It cost £224 for plane tickets and £130 in cab fares to get here, for me and the lad. By the time I've paid for everything I'll have very little change out of a thousand quid. I think it's worth it, I love it, I've been in this field since eight o'clock this morning and I haven't left.' It is now well past teatime. Joe has plenty of stamina for horse fairs. 'Me and my son have been to all the horse fairs in England—Stow, Appleby, Barnet . . . I love the horses and I love the horsy talk, in the pub, of an evening with horsy people—what we've got, how we bred it and what went wrong. In England Appleby's the best fair to go to, but we love them all.

'There's a lot of good animals here, a lot I'd like to take home with me, but I'm holding on, hoping the prices will come down. But there'll be more to look at tomorrow.'

But you can't always take the chance of letting a good horse get away.

'Beggars can't be choosers, someone might walk on and take the horse you want . . . Once you make a decision you go in for it,' puts in Phillip.

A lot of people are keeping their horses off the Fair Green because of the bad weather. It has been raining continuously for the past

eight hours and the ground has become very muddy. The mud affects the feather, the hair on the hoof, and the horse wouldn't look so good.

'The feather is very important on the hoof. The hair must cover the whole of the hoof.'

Well over three-quarters of the travellers' horses are heavy Cobs rather than trotting horses. Joe is a trotting fan, but he doesn't buy trotting horses at Ballinasloe.

'If they are trotters they're usually a bit iffy. They might have something wrong with them. The only really good ones you'd get here are foals or yearlings which can be trained up.'

Phillip agrees. 'Most of the horses in this field are black and whites, heavy horses . . . and that's what this fair is all about.'

At least it is on the Saturday; by the time Sunday rolls round these 'black and whites' and trotters belonging to the travellers will only make up about a third of the horses at Ballinasloe—the rest will be the farmers' horses.

The dealing really gets going after dark, in the bars. Many of the English buyers stay at the Jekyll and Hyde. By half-past-eight in the front bar you could be mistaken for thinking you were in South London. The 'lads' are tearing into their pints of lager. The talk is all of horses—what's around, what's coming and how last year's horses have come on since being bought. They tease each other, talk of deals, and eventually start to do a few deals amongst themselves. Joe Buckley has about twenty horses back in England, the others have a similar number.

Phillip Lee, the car dealer from Middlesex, is working hard on a horse dealer from Kent.

'I've been ruined something rotten out there today,' complains Phillip as he tries to persuade the dealer to give him a better price on a mare he is after.

Tommy Love, who appears to have the nickname 'Bald Forehead', has a horse that Phillip wants, but he isn't playing ball.

'He'll come round to it when the drink hits him,' says Phillip. 'I feel lucky tonight.'

The horse in question is a black and white mare that Tommy

Bareback and fearless. A horse is ridden at full speed down the concrete strip.

brought across from England two weeks ago. He is one of the dealers who comes across to buy stock before the fair. The mare has never set foot on the Fair Green and is one of forty which Tommy has brought with him to Ballinasloe. Most of those were actually bought in Ireland. It is being kept in a field on the edge of town. Phillip is offering £15,000 for the horse; Tommy wants more. This is £15,000 for a horse which has never actually been to the fair and which Phillip has not seen. The two men will have to get close to an agreement before Phillip can even get to look at her.

A lad from Dublin comes into the bar. He is about 20 years old, slightly fat. He starts talking to Phillip and a couple of minutes later they start to deal.

'Go on, five hundred and she's yours . . .'

'I don't know, four fifty,' replies Phillip.

'She's a good mare, she'll come on well.'

'It's hard money in England, we've got no money!'

'Four Seventy-five.'

'It's hard money . . .'

'It's the same all over . . .' replies the Irish lad. 'Go on, four fifty.'

The seller grabs Phillip's hand and slaps his down on it, Phillip does the same. The dealer has a drink and then goes off in search of another sale. Again the horse is bought blind.

'I trust him,' explains Phillip. 'I've bought horses off him before, and I know he won't rip me off. These boys from Dublin have been coming down for a couple of years. I've had good luck with the horses I've bought.'

On the Sunday morning there are plenty of sore heads and a few lighter wallets. Both Phillip and Joe have already started spending. Both have bought something cheap to get into the swing of things. The horses may well be sold on to other buyers, or they might end up being shipped back to England at the end of the week. Neither of them cost more than five hundred pounds.

By ten o'clock Phillip has been to see his dream horse, the £15,000 mare, which has never seen the Fair Green and probably never will.

'She's beautiful, but he's still asking too much.' Phillip now says that as if he doesn't completely believe it. There are far more travellers' horses here than there were on the Saturday. By lunchtime the bottom corner of the Green is jam-packed. The other difference is

that stalls have been set on part of the concrete which was being used the previous day to show off the horses.

Some of the travellers wander off to see what is going on over on the other side of the field. A few of the farmers come and have a look at the black and white horses. A large gaggle of men gathers round one particular group of horses. This means one of two things—either a fight . . . or a deal. It turns out to be a deal, and another three mares along with two foals change hands.

Beside the railings a middle-aged traveller reaches into his inside pocket and hauls out a wad of notes. There can't have been less

It's a hard life, and sometimes you just have to lie down.

than £2,000 there which he hands over to an older, rough-looking man. The old man reaches down into his trouser pocket and produces his luck money. They shake hands briefly and after a few words the seller goes off to look for a horse to spend his money on.

The day winds on. Deals are done, horses are talked about and admired, and generally a pattern emerges about prices. The weather on the Sunday is kind and the black and white horses don't look so sorry for themselves. The prices are starting to fall. The English buyers aren't going to give 'silly money' for the horses and the Irish travellers are finding out that it isn't so easy to sell. It seems quite likely that the prices might fall even farther on the Monday.

On the Sunday night it is almost impossible to get food anywhere in the town. Everywhere is packed out. One of the bars has turned its ballroom into a sort of up-market soup kitchen. Steaks, chicken, lamb and beef are being served from a long line of hot trays, as if they are being dished out as school dinners. The punters, weary after their day of dealing, sit at long tables. The food is cheap and cheerful, and half-way through the meal a man and his wife decide to put on an impromptu display of domestic bliss by screaming at one another. The entertainment is only a slight distraction.

The boys from London are not too bothered about food. By nine o'clock in the evening Phillip Lee and Joe Buckley have taken up their positions in the Jekyll and Hyde. Joe is holding court with a post-mortem on the day's events.

Yes there was some good stuff, but it was far too expensive. They weren't going to pay the sort of silly prices that were being asked, and they know that if they wait they won't have to.

Phillip is a lot nearer to getting his horse.

'I'm going to go and have a look at her again tomorrow. I reckon I might be able to talk some sense into this man here.'

Tommy Love has a wry smile on his face. Somehow they both know the result; it is just the score line that has still to be decided.

This is the mid-point of the weekend. Many deals have been done, but on this occasion there is the feeling that the best horses have not yet been sold. The previous year the Irish sellers had put the prices through the roof, and this year the English have come prepared.

'If they don't start being realistic there's going to be a lot of sad

men on that field by the end of the day tomorrow,' says Joe. The English buyers are firm: they'd rather go without than pay over the odds.

It seems that the Irish dealers are coming round to their way of thinking.

'They'll be a bit more sensible tomorrow . . . you wait and see . . .' Phillip reckons.

'I saw a mare they were asking five thousand for this morning. By tonight she was down to four.'

The night wears on and somewhere during it the deal is done. Phillip Lee has got his prized mare, and Tommy Love must have got the money he was asking for it. Tommy and Phillip live just a few miles away from each other in England. They have both paid hundreds of pounds to come across the sea to Ireland to sell a horse which could have stayed at home.

Of course this horse, Tommy's mare, is now famous around town. The price he got for it is much higher than the price he would have got in England, besides which he will not have to pay to have it shipped back. This is because there was competition, a sort of free market which helped to bump the price up. So by bringing it to Ballinasloe Tommy has achieved two things—he got a good price for the mare and his reputation has been enhanced by the mere presence of the horse at the fair.

Monday morning dawns bright and clear. The dawn chorus is joined by the sound of horses' hooves—twenty horses, eighty hooves, being trotted briskly towards the Fair Green. Mares, foals and a stallion in a long procession. Once again a young lad sits astride the first horse. He has no saddle, he has no hard hat, and his grin shows that even at a young age he is no stranger to losing teeth in a fight. At the corner of Harbour Road and Dunlo Street the traffic has well and truly ground to a halt yet again. People and horses are dodging between the cars. The Garda are doing their best, but are getting scant reward for their trouble.

On the Fair Green itself Phillip and Joe have been up for a couple of hours at least. The deal has been done, Phillip has his horse and, true to form, he is complaining about the price.

'This man here . . .' he points to Tommy Love, 'has taken me for a right mug, I paid far too much . . .' He then breaks into a laugh.

He is a happy man. He has the horse he wanted and soon that horse will be in his field back in England. He won't say how much he paid for it, but it wouldn't be much less than sixteen or seventeen thousand pounds.

'She's going back this afternoon, I've got her booked onto a flight. By this time tomorrow she'll be standing in my field at home.' He is taking no chances. 'All I've got do now is make some money to pay for it . . . someone's going to suffer.'

The pair of them wander off to look at a few more horses. Phillip will probably buy at least one more horse before he leaves town.

Horses are changing hands far more quickly by this stage in the fair. The prices for most have dropped, or at least are beginning to drop. A few horses have been 'bought-back' by the Irish breeders to stop them leaving the country, but only a few. The horses which have been sold are starting to leave town; the ones which have not are getting cheaper by the minute.

Early afternoon on the Monday, and a pair of taxis are waiting outside the Jekyll and Hyde. Joe Buckley is not a happy man.

'I bought this stallion last night, and when I went to have a look at him this morning I found that he only had one testicle. That means that he's no good for the purpose for which I got him which was for breeding.'

In fact it's quite likely that the stallion would be able to perform his duties perfectly well with just one, but Joe has a point. He has paid good money for a horse which he was told was in perfect working order, and now he has discovered that this is not so.

Joe is being philosophical. 'These things happen. I bought him in the pub last night and I'd had too much to drink.'

Not only that, but because trade has been so busy the banks have run out of Irish punts for the English buyers to change with their sterling.

On the Sunday afternoon it is almost impossible to move for black and white horses.

PEOPLE ENTERI
THIS FAIR GREE
DO SO AT THEIR
OWN RISK

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Followers of the Fair

Like the court of a travelling king, the traders and the hawkers and the gamesmen come drifting in the wake of the buyers and the sellers. Horses are important at Ballinasloe, but they are not the whole story. This is a jamboree: the hunters, the jumpers and the ponies come in their boxes, the travellers come in their trailers and the rest of the show just follows behind. Most of the folk who come in the wake of the horses at Ballinasloe can be seen at the other fairs which happen in the summer. Auld Lammas, Puck Fair and Spancil Hill are just three.

The north-west part of the Green is where the farmers' horses are bought and sold, the south-west corner is where the travellers bring their horses down the steps. The rest is taken up by the traders.

Some of the entourage are there to serve the horses, some are there for the people. Some come to feed the stomachs, others to tempt the soul.

There have always been people ready to sell food to hungry travellers, and Ballinasloe is no exception. These days the ox-roast has given way to the burger bar. Dozens of mobile catering vans descend on the Fair Green and on the town itself. They give their own distinct flavour to the fair—bright and gaudy, with cheap and cheerful food.

The generators that power the vans give off petrol fumes which mix with the smell of the hot dogs and the urine from the horses. It's a smell that hangs heavy on the nostrils, Ballinasloe has its own very distinctive odour during Fair Week. The vans sell burgers, hot dogs, tea, coffee, fags, candy-floss and chips. Everywhere there are chips, in little polystyrene trays. The trays become part of the flotsam and jetsam of the fair, swirling around in the wind along with the polythene sheeting. Some of the catering vans sell whole roast

chickens. On the Sunday afternoon one of the travellers is cheerfully wandering along a row of horses holding one of the unfortunate birds in one hand and ripping great chunks of flesh with the other. If you're looking for good table manners, Ballinasloe is the wrong place to come.

The catering vans are here because they make money out of the fair and the fair makes money out of them. They all have to pay to come here and the money that the Town Council gets is ploughed back into the fair in terms of increased security. One reason why these vans do so well is that people tend to spend the entire day on the field, looking at the horses. Horse-dealers don't go off into

In amongst the horses one of the travellers' children sells sweets.

the town to get fed, they stay out amongst the wheeling and dealing on the Fair Green. After all, half-an-hour in the town could mean missing out on the horse they've been looking for all weekend.

The caterers even get in amongst the horses themselves. Youngsters, many of them children of the travellers, set up their little sweet stalls on the Fair Green, selling off cans of pop and chocolate bars. They use an old table, or an old wooden door resting on a couple of crates. They set up these stalls within trampling distance of the hooves. The horses don't seem too bothered and the punters are glad to get their hands on a bar of chocolate if they feel peckish. If there's money to be made a way will be found to make it.

Charities also come to collect money. Animal charities have no problem raising funds here, and if you don't want to risk buying a horse there is one available as the first prize in a draw organised by the Horse Protection Society. People who love horses are always happy to dig into their pockets to help out any organisation which will look after animals in distress.

Then there are those who are there to serve the horses themselves, and the needs of those who own and ride them. 'Tack' vans are one of the most common attractions. You can't just buy the horse, that would be far too simple; you have to have all the gear to go with it—bridles, saddles, stirrups and reins. Lorries pull up onto the Fair Green loaded to the hilt with this sort of gear. They drop down a hatch at the side and start selling it. Saddles go for anything from £49 upwards. If you are not fussy you can probably buy a horse and a saddle here and still have change from a couple of hundred pounds.

A well-dressed horse is nothing without a well-dressed rider, and alongside the accessories for the horses are the riders' accessories, the waxed jackets and the hats. The style which is most popular is the Panama. The women in particular wear their long waxed coats and their Panama hats, together with the long leather boots.

One of the busiest men during the Ballinasloe fair is Rory Kilduff. He doesn't actually trade on the Fair Green but has the last remaining saddler's business in the town. In fact it is the last surviving saddler's business in the Province of Connaught. At one time there

The last of his kind. Rory Kilduff at work in his shop on Main Street.

were nine. His shop is on Main Street, the wooden front painted blue with the family name above the large window. Stepping in here is like stepping back in time, back to a lost age of quality when workmanship counted for something, and when excellence mattered more than speed. An old clock on the wall ticks away the hours, and the minutes. Perhaps in this shop the passing of time is irrelevant. Rory aims to get the job done right—that comes first above all else. The wooden bench where he works is in front of the window, allowing the whole world to see him. The wood is chipped and pitted from decades of leatherwork. Old and new tools lie side by side.

Strictly speaking it is not quite right to call Rory a saddler. He used to make saddles but that job has long since been taken over by factories and machines. His skills are taken up with making and mending the leather accessories that go with the horses. The bridles, the whips and the head collars are all meat and drink to him. He is a true craftsman, refusing to take modern short cuts for the sake of speed.

The leather used to come from Limerick, but the tanneries have long since disappeared. Now it is imported from England, made from the hide of young bullocks. It is soaked in various chemicals, but many years ago human urine was used, both to soften and toughen the hides into leather. In Roman times the waste from the sewerage system was a valuable commodity.

'I prefer to use this bullock hide,' says Rory. 'It's much softer than cow hide but it's still got the strength you need.' Throughout the fair people come into the shop, mainly wanting bridles made, or gear repaired. They might want special bridles for breaking the horses in, or perhaps a lunging rein for practice, or perhaps they might come to Rory with a saddle which needs attention.

On a shelf high up above the door there's an old faded photograph. The shop is the same but the name is different. Greaney and Sons is what it says. This was the business which his father took over at the turn of the century.

To watch Rory at work needs almost as much patience as actually working with the leather. As he works on a head collar the two travellers who have asked him to make it look on with admiration. They know that Rory will do a superb job, and they feel privileged

to watch someone with his skills at work. The soft red-brown leather has to be handled with the utmost care, but at the same time it is tough.

Rory had an apprenticeship of five years. He learnt the business from his father, but unfortunately he will be the last of his line. His nephew has chosen not to work with leather; instead he runs a fruit and vegetable shop a few doors down the street from his uncle. In the late afternoon the sun comes through the window of Rory's shop at a shallow angle, and as the sun sets on the shop, so it sets on this particular trade in Ballinasloe.

There is a sense of continuity to the fair. The same people keep coming back year after year, dealers, traders and visitors. If Ballinasloe gets you once, you're hooked for life.

The blacksmith on the Fair Green is another regular. In the old days there would have been several farriers in the town itself, and at one time there were no less than eight blacksmiths at work in Ballinasloe. Now there are none. The last of them shut up shop in the 1970s, going the same way as the horse on the land. As the number of horses declined, so did the need for shoeing, and farm machinery was replaced rather than mended when it became broken.

Now the blacksmith follows the fairs around the country like the other traders. He rolls up in a van with his supply of wrought iron for the horses' shoes and a portable kiln, run by bottled gas, to heat the metal in. It is another spectator sight, allowing people to stand and marvel at his skills with the hammer and tongs.

He will make and fix a shoe in about five minutes and a set of four in about twenty. Each horse's hoof is different and so each shoe has to be made individually for the horse that will wear it. A large crowd gathers round, on the principle that work is something that is better to watch than to join in with.

They look on admiringly as he beats the glowing iron with rhythmic strokes. The shoe soon loses its glow, but it still yields to the hammer. It is tried on the horse for size and then beaten some more. Eventually, with a slight hiss of burning hoof, it is fitted and nailed into place.

There are people who want to sell you things and there are people who are happy just to take your money. As well as the traders there

are the tinkers and the gamblers. As long as there have been fairs there have been people to bet and take money from 'punters'.

'Now it's up to me to hide it and for you to find it.' Talking fifteen words to the dozen with his sales patter, the card trick man is ready to relieve those who have more money than sense of their hard-earned cash.

The tools of his trade are an upturned beer crate and three playing cards—two tens and a Queen.

'They say that you can bring a horse to the water, but a pencil has to be led.'

Yes, it is irrelevant, but the patter just keeps coming.

'Now one, two and three. I'd reckon the middle would have the good card just like the last time.'

He shuffles them round faster than the eye can see, gibbering away all the time as he does it.

'Now for five or ten pounds, where is the picture card? It was in the middle last time, is it there again?'

Sometimes the punters win, sometimes they don't. The card-man has a better than evens chance of coming out on top. The punter has to find one card in three; there's a three to one chance that he'll succeed, if he doesn't the card-man wins.

The punters look on transfixed. As soon as one game is finished he sweeps the cards to one side, shuffles them and goes on to the next. Twenty or thirty pounds per game is not unusual. He takes it in his stride when the punters win; they take it in theirs when they lose.

There are other gamesmen. Money can be gambled on the toss of a couple of coins. Bets are taken on both showing heads, anything else and the trickster wins.

Enterprise thrives in Ballinasloe during the fair and not just on the Fair Green. A thriving market takes place in the centre of town. You can buy a suit for £30. There are other stalls selling pots and pans or cassette tapes of Irish country music, there's even a stall selling shoes, at £3 a pair. This market happens all the year round, but the week of the fair means extra business for the traders.

The mobile farrier fits a shoe. He would expect to fit hundreds during the course of the fair.

A tall man in his fifties stands next to a stall full of ready to wear suits.

'I tried living in England, but I didn't like it. I bought this ambulance off this chap but it turned out to be a hearse. You always end up coming home. You get a bit of business during the fair: the travellers come and buy their suits here, they're really good value.'

In the marketplace there are the last remnants of the sheep fair which came, in time, to be replaced by the horse fair. Local farmers come and park up their stock wagons, and sheep and cattle are then sold to other farmers from the back of them. The dealing is done in much the same way as the horses out on the Fair Green. The price is haggled, agreed, and with a flurry of spit, a slapping of hands, the deal is done.

Then there are the buskers, ranging from rock bands on the street to the old hurdy-gurdy man with his puppets. No one knows how long he's been coming to Ballinasloe, but he sets his music machine down next to the Allied Irish Bank, opposite the Market Square. As the music plays the puppets on his barrow dance up and down, and coins jangle their way into his hat. Farther up Society Street the Loughnane Brothers, Gerry and Brendan, sell tapes of their music, Irish country. It comes thundering out of a ghetto blaster, competing with yet more Irish country music streaming out of the open doorway of the bar next door.

Nowadays performance artists have joined the buskers. Clowns wander up and down the street, children have their faces painted and there are balloons on sale for kids of all ages.

There are those who say that the fair has become too commercialised in the past few years, but most people in the town accept that this is the only way the event can survive. The caterers, the stall-holders and the travellers all provide a valuable income which might mean the difference between the fair continuing and being too expensive to run. The problem is that it is difficult to see how the fair could ever stop. Even if the Fair Committee or the Town Council said that it would not take place, people would still come to the town to sell horses on the first week in October. It would probably be very difficult to stop them.

One of the many buskers at the fair. The puppets dance in time to the music.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Smoke and Strong Whiskey

During the first week in October the sun sets at about six-thirty in the evening. On the days the horses are being sold the cars and the trucks and the horse-boxes take to the streets at about the same time, moving out of town for the night, off home, or to the fields where the horses will stay till the following day.

As the fair on the Green winds down for the day the town itself comes to life. After a hard day's horse-trading there's some serious drinking to be done.

There are 6,000 people living in Ballinasloe, and there are more than 30 bars; or to put it another way, there is a bar for every 200 people. In Ballinasloe, during the fair these bars are full to breaking point every night. The most important requirement for anybody coming to the October Fair is stamina. After a hard day's work out on the Fair Green there's often a hard night ahead, and if you are dealing horses it is not a bad idea to go into a few bars to find out what everybody else is paying for their animals. For the bars in the town the fair brings in vital business. One manager reckons that the bar does four weeks' worth of business during the week of the fair.

If there is a horse for everyone here at Ballinasloe, the same goes for the bars and the nightlife. There are small bars, big bars, bars that are quiet and bars with noise. Some have music, some are plush and some are simple.

You will end up asleep on your feet, and after all, that's what the horses do—they sleep standing up. The nightlife in Ballinasloe can start as early as ten o'clock in the morning, before the bars are supposed to be open. The capacity for drink at this event has to be seen to be believed.

In a back alley a couple of the lads wait by a gate. A few minutes later they have been let into one of the bars by the back door. It's

As the Fair Green empties the traffic builds up. It can take up to three hours to get all the fair traffic cleared out of Ballinasloe.

a quarter to ten in the morning and the bars don't officially open until eleven.

The biggest bar in town is at Hayden's Hotel. This was built during the 1960s, a large modern building on Dunlo Street. This is where those with the most money stay during the fair. It is booked up for weeks beforehand, often with visitors from abroad. During the weekends of the fair it is full to overflowing.

In the entrance plastic sheeting is laid down throughout the length and breadth of the lobby. The mud from the Fair Green seems to have no trouble at all in reaching right into the town, and its buildings. Like many of the bars there are security men on the doors. They keep the drunks out, or anyone else if the hotel is full.

The main bar can easily hold a couple of hundred people, who can spill over into the lounge next door. Next to the bar is a res-

taurant which is usually packed to the rafters during the fair, and a function suite where the lunch for the special guests is held on the first Sunday prior to the official opening ceremony.

This is a high class hotel, but everybody comes in, farmers, travellers, tourists. For them it is just another watering hole on the circuit.

The Jekyll and Hyde is another one, with its two contrasting bars. Like Hayden's there are lads on the door watching who comes in, and making sure that those who are under 18 don't get past. Security and trouble in the pubs can be a problem with a lot of people in a very small town—there's a lot of drink floating around. Some of the bars won't let the travellers in, others don't like youngsters coming in.

In the front bar the travellers and the farmers pull the day's business to pieces. The English buyers like this bar in particular. They come with their cockney accents, drinking lager rather than Guinness, talking of deals – not just horse deals but cars and property and land. These are the 'lads' out on the town, away from their wives and off the leash.

The Jekyll and Hyde also caters for people during the daytime, and like several other bars in the town it offers Irish stew to hungry horse fans. A bowlful costs about £2 and there is enough in it to keep most people going until the evening.

This is a good place to go if you want to see a deal being done.

There are lots of small and intimate watering holes, just one room at the front of the building with a small bar and enough space for about 50 people at most. Paul Dooley's lounge on the corner of Harbour Road and Dunlo Street is one of these. On the Dunlo Street side of the premises there is a shop, just like any other grocer's shop, selling everything from cereals to baked beans. Just along the Harbour Road side of the building there is a pair of dark double doors which lead into a tiny bar and a slightly larger lounge. Here the old men sit. Lights are inset into the ceiling, their narrow beams piercing the smoke-filled gloom, giving the faces a ghost-like quality. The men sit, some with stout, some with whiskey and some with both, talking and remembering fairs gone by. As with Hayden's there is plastic sheeting down on the carpet. By nine o'clock in the evening some of the men can barely stand. Some gently sway, singing or muttering to themselves, others just drift off into sleep.

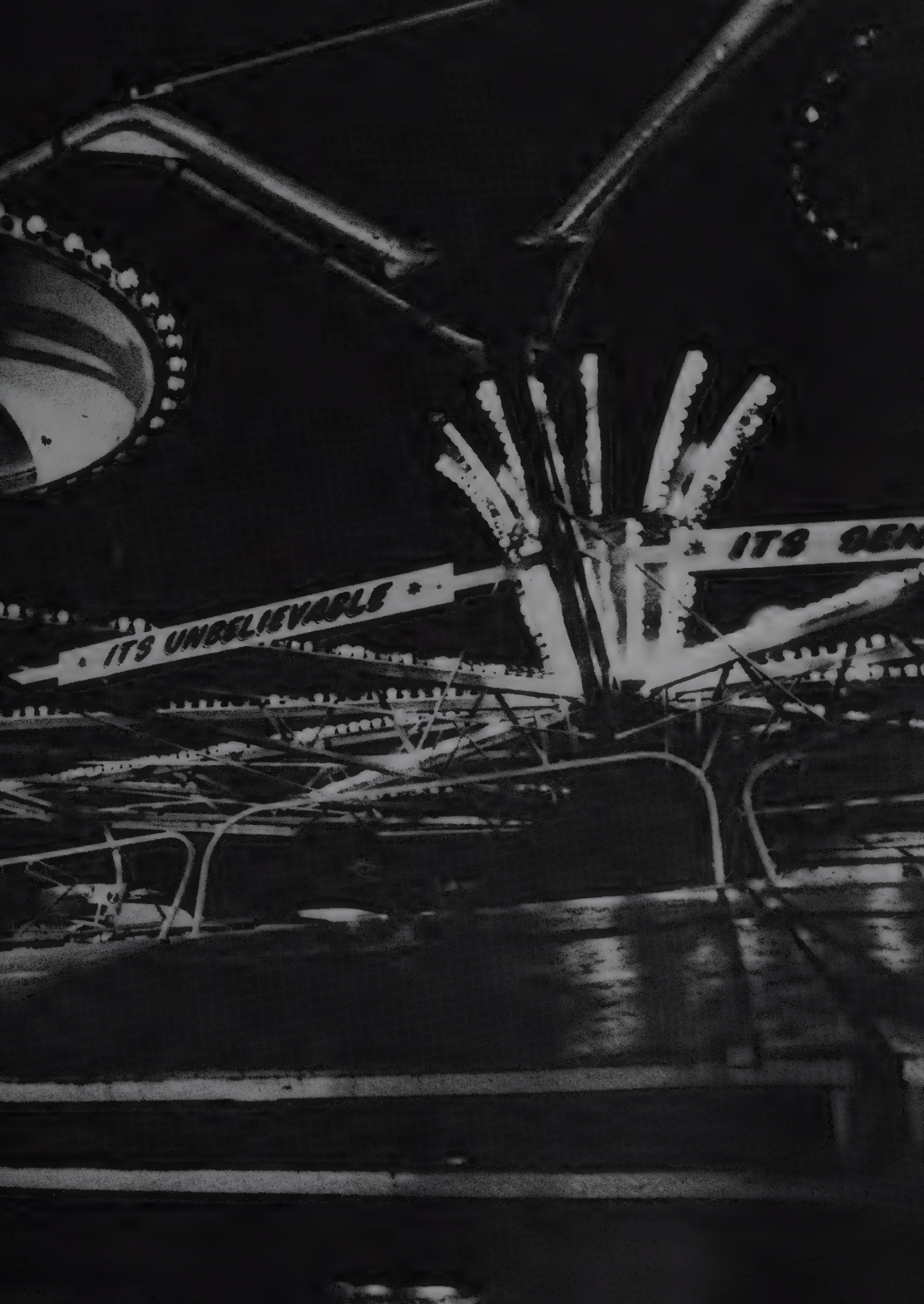
A bar of two halves. Owner Tom Sheridan outside the Jekyll and Hyde.

There is a glint in the eyes of the old men. For some of them this is the week they live for. They measure out their lives with the passing of the fair and it means more to most of them than Christmas. Every year their friends get fewer. Like a parade of old soldiers, they remember what it was like, and the famous fairs in the past, in the golden age of the horse, and they remember the famous horses which marked out these fairs.

By half-past nine the bars are all packed out. Some have their doors bolted to stop anybody else coming in. The worst nights are

Overleaf: St John's Church is lit up as the youngsters enjoy the fun of the fair.

KEEP ARMS
AND
LEGS IN CAR


IT'S UNBELIEVABLE
IT'S

the Saturday and the Sunday of the first weekend and the Saturday of the second weekend. By the first Sunday it is quite possible that the Guinness may have started to run out. It is not unknown for some of the bars to run dry. Of course it is wonderful news for the people who run the bars, but it can be hell for those who have to serve.

As the bars fill up so do the streets. There are perhaps even one or two horses to be seen, stragglers being led back to the fields after a drinking session or maybe someone showing off or even someone in search of a sale.

Musical tales of loneliness and heartache, mid-west country tear-jerkers with an Irish accent come wafting out of the bars on Society Street. Occasionally there's some shouting. By now the traffic jam has gone, but not long gone. In the burger bar on Main Street the kids 'hang out'. The burger bar does big business during the fair, especially on the Sunday. Chip wrappers and the polystyrene containers for the burgers, kebabs and hot dogs start to litter the streets. There's a queue outside one of the few pay phones which has not already been jammed full of coins. The night is still young and people are just getting into the swing of things.

Next to the Fair Green is a fun-fair. This starts up at about two or three o'clock in the afternoon and keeps going through to midnight. If the weather is good the screams of the teenagers on the rides can be heard half-way across town. Two small boys come rushing out of the travellers' camp; they can't be more than nine or ten, but they try to knock seven bells out of each other. This is the nearest thing to a traveller's fight that most people will see. The teenagers and the older men don't try to stop it. Most of them just stand around bemused, too cracked up with laughter to intervene.

From the street many of the bars look fairly ordinary. There are a couple which have ornate façades, but most could pass for a barber's shop, or an off-licence. One of the least assuming is Sullivan's. Tucked away at the end of Main Street this is the place to be for traditional music. The tables are topped with Formica, the door is double-glazed aluminium with frosted glass, net curtains hang at the window and getting to the toilet can be a major challenge. In charge is Minnie Sullivan. She rules the bar with a rod of iron, a quick wit and an instinctive judgement for what people want. What

people get here is a beautifully served pint of Guinness and some of the finest singing in Connaught. Musicians come from all over Ireland to play in the back room of the bar. Around the walls are pictures of the people who have come to listen or to play. Photographs, some faded, recall thousands of nights spent with the playing of the fiddles or the accordion or the Illyan pipes. There are also photographs and cuttings of the local football teams, not association, but 'All Ireland' Gaelic Football teams. The Galway team features prominently, even though they have not won the championship for some time.

Minnie took over the bar in the late 1940s from her father who ran it before that. Businesses have a habit of being passed down through families. At the height of the fair it is impossible to move in Minnie's; you stake your place by the bar and if at all possible avoid going to the toilet. Often there are two different sets of musicians competing against each other, one group in the back room with guitars and fiddles, another group in the front bar with flutes, spoons and singing. The talk is of horses, the songs can be about anything. Even without the fair people come here to sing. A man in late middle age is playing the fiddle at a table in the back room.

'He used to be the All Ireland Champion player,' says one of the drinkers. 'He used to hang around with the Dubliners.'

Other famous names have come into Minnie's bar at some time or other. There is no record kept of who they are, though. Some people think that Van Morrison might have been seen once, and Christy Moore as well. Minnie takes it all in her stride.

'I don't really know if anyone famous has come here, I don't ask their names.'

One of the highlights of Minnie's is Pat McDonald. Every year he comes down to Ballinasloe from Dungannon in County Tyrone for the music and the crack, and the horses.

'Minnie's is the best pub in Ballinasloe . . .'

And Pat must be one of the best singers around. His version of 'The Cregan White Hare' has to be heard to be believed.

As the night wears on and the smoke thickens people sink deep into their souls with the drink. Reels and jigs and songs mix effortlessly in a continual stream. Pat is a legend. He sings with a voice as clear as a frosty night and as thick as syrup. The whole bar falls

silent. It is a ritual which is performed several times during the week, and by the end poor Pat's voice is almost gone. He is back year after year, along with the flute player. Nobody knows where he comes from, or where he goes to. He just appears every year, a part of the fair.

Nobody minds if you join in or not. People just turn up, pull a violin from a battered old case and start to play. As the drinks start to hit some of the punters the tales come out. Of horses bought and sold.

A lad in a leather jacket sits, or rather slumps, at a table in the backroom of Minnie's.

There's always a warm welcome at Minnie's bar on Main Street.

'Wee shhhtopped on the road from Conne . . . Connemarah.' Five minutes later it turns out that he has come down from the North with a couple of mates, and more money than sense, bought a horse for £400 and doesn't seem too bothered about it.

Drink can turn a man into a fool and a fool into an ass, but in Ballinasloe there is plenty of comfort and mutual forgiveness for those who are smashed out of their brains.

All the time the talk is of horses, and the prices that have been paid out on the field during the day. Quite a few local residents have come in to Minnie's to catch up on the gossip.

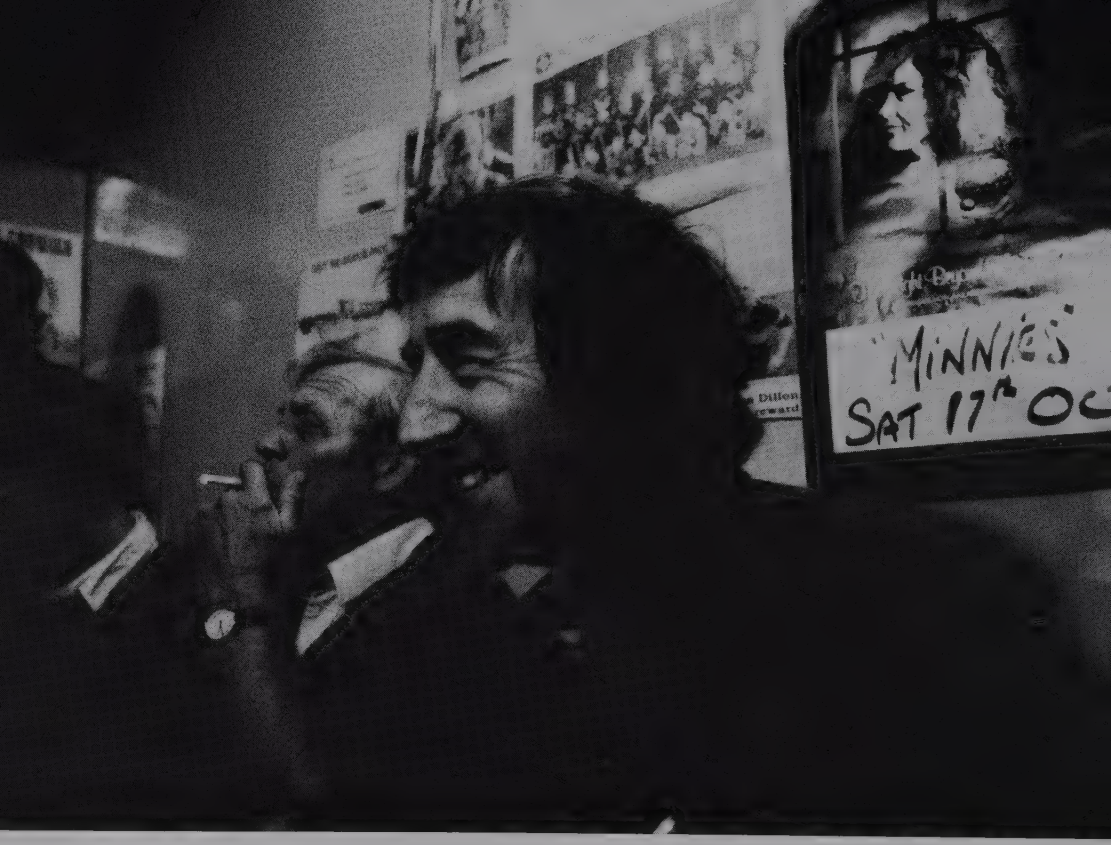
'I never go on to the Green, far too dangerous,' says one woman as she starts to sink a vodka and 'red' lemonade. 'Don't get me wrong, I love the horses, but I wouldn't go out amongst them, you could get a nasty kick! There was that fellow killed the other year.'

There are dangers in the drink as well. After all, look at what happened to Joe Buckley, and one of his mates had to be carried onto the plane because he got so drunk the night before they left for Ireland. Perhaps the drinking smooths the dealing, tears down people's inhibitions and makes them more willing to compromise.

The smoke rasps at your throat and the whiskey numbs the brain; by morning the head is throbbing, but by teatime you're ready to do it all over again. The dealers have the stamina to see it through, especially the travellers. The event for them becomes a kind of test. They drive their horses to the limit and they push themselves to keep going through the night, and with little or no sleep they are out on the field again at the crack of dawn.

The Sunday night is the busiest in the bars. It is the climax of the first weekend. This is the point at which the buyers find out what people are paying and the sellers start to worry about getting rid of their stock the following day.

Sometimes one of the hotels in town might hold a ceilidh, or a ball. Normally the drinking hours in this part of the world are pretty relaxed. Ballinasloe is no exception, apart from during the fair. The Garda who patrol the streets late at night make sure that all the bars are closed by one o'clock in the morning. It does help to cut down on trouble, and although, at the time, most people would like to go on drinking till the sun comes up, they would feel a lot better if they actually went to bed.



Pat McDonald, one of the finest singers in town.

Things start to wind down after one o'clock in the morning. Outside Minnie's it isn't just horses which are being sold off. A middle-aged man in a leather jacket is inviting bids to buy his wife. If the poor woman were present he wouldn't be around to tell the tale. 'Come on, lads, how much am I bid . . . ? Three hundred at the back . . . At three o two, three ten, three twenty-five.'

A voice cries out from the back:

'One thousand!'

'Oh, by Jesus . . . she's not worth that much!' The Garda move him on, and everybody else goes back to their beds for a few hours.

As night moves towards morning and the respectable people sleep in their beds, Ballinasloe is quiet, well almost . . . On the breeze there's a sound of a horse whinnying on the edge of town. Perhaps, like some of the dealers, it feels it can do without sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

Beyond Ballinasloe

At the end of the fair plastic sheeting from the stalls swirls around the Fair Green. The tanglers, the travellers and the horses have all gone. Cans and bottles, cardboard and crisp packets litter the place. Suddenly Ballinasloe returns to being the sleepy place it has always been. The mess will soon be cleared up, the mud will grow back to grass and next year the horses will be back to do it all again. The morning after the final day of the fair there's a fierce wind and bright sunshine. In the Market Square a couple of stalls are selling vegetables; all the other traders are gone. On the hill below the church a few of the travellers are starting to pack up ready to leave, and in the waiting-room at the station the last of the English buyers wonders why his 'English' mobile phone won't work here.

The horses have all gone . . . off to their new homes, or to spend the winter at their old ones, if they have not been sold. Some will go off to the four corners of the world, some will go to farms just a few miles away, others will be shipped off to the States and to Europe. The majority which leave the country will go across the Irish Sea to Great Britain. The hooves of the most valuable horses hardly touch the ground. They are whisked off to Dublin Airport where they are flown back to the United Kingdom. Others will be shipped back to Britain through Dublin Docks. The English buyers want to get their horses back as soon as possible; they worry that they may become unsettled if they are left waiting to be shipped for too long.

The travelling itself can be quite stressful for the animals. They are in an unfamiliar environment, they don't really know what is happening to them and they don't know where they are going. By flying the horse straight back, or by making special arrangements to put it on the first available boat back to England, that stress can be avoided.

The travellers go off to their winter sites all over Ireland, and beyond. They take their horses with them. Some will be ridden or driven to their new homes, most will be loaded onto horse-boxes and taken to their new pastures, or grass verges, within a few hours. The following year, when the short, dark winter days are over, the trotters will be raced, not up and down a concrete strip, but up and down the road. These races often happen at the other fairs around Ireland. The season starts with the first of the spring fairs and for weeks beforehand the races will be built up into a special occasion, the big match. Bets will be taken and the race will have all the hype of a major boxing championship.

On a road at the edge of town, on an evening just before the bulk of the people arrive for the fair, the race will take place. A quiet

The most valuable horses are flown home, straight after the fair.

stretch of road may be closed off for half an hour. These travellers spend a lot of their time doing road-repairs, so 'road closed' signs aren't that hard to find. Most of the time the races are held between the trotting horses pulling their sulkies, but occasionally a couple of lads will ride bareback and hell for leather against each other to find out who has the best horse.

They will also use the winter for breeding, both amongst themselves and amongst their horses.

Some of the travellers' horses will have the benefit of a luscious field for the winter. Albert Coates is one of the English buyers who come to Ballinasloe every year. He is after black and white horses and usually brings several back with him to England. He has some fields and a stable at Swanley in Kent. Some of the horses there are 'black and whites', others are trotters, and others are ponies to hire out for riding. The horses here have plenty of good grass to eat and shelter in the cold winter months.

Six months after Ballinasloe, several of the mares which he bought are in foal and will probably give birth shortly before the following year's fair.

'Look at her,' says Albert proudly, 'it's the colour, the markings which make her so valuable . . . A horse with markings like that is worth a lot of money because it's so rare.'

Away from the mud of the Fair Green it is easy to see why the travellers like these horses so much. In the dry weather the 'feather' around the hooves is luxuriant. Albert is lucky to have several fields to keep his horses on. Southern England is rapidly disappearing under a mass of concrete, roads and houses. Land is becoming more and more scarce and horses tend to be kept wherever there is a spare acre or two. As well as dealing in the horses at Ballinasloe, the English breeders also swap them around amongst each other.

During the winter months Albert looks after the mares and stallions which he has bought during the summer, making sure that they breed and that they are comfortable whilst they are 'in-foal', but as soon as the summer months arrive he will be back out on the road with a horse-box or two . . . first at Stow, then Appleby, before he heads for Ireland again.

The farmers will be concentrating on breeding their horses, or breaking in the foals as they grow to become yearlings. Sometimes

Albert Coates with a 'mare in foal' six months after Ballinasloe Fair, on his farm in Kent.

the horses are left outside over the winter, sometimes they are brought into stables. Different farmers have different views. Some believe that if the horse is brought inside it makes it 'soft' and less able to cope with harsh conditions. Much depends on where the horses are going. If they are to be kept in Ireland the chances are that the winter will be mild enough for them to stay outside right through it; if they are being shipped back to Northern England or

The morning after. Plastic sheeting and rubbish swirl around the Fair Green. Soon the horses, the travellers and the deals will be just a distant memory.

to Scotland the chances are that the climate will be much less suitable. The advantage of being able to leave a horse out right through the winter is that it can feed off the grass in the field and will therefore cost a lot less to keep.

In Ballinasloe the preparations for the next fair begin almost as soon as the last horse-box leaves town. The committee discusses possible improvements, how problems can be solved and how

money can be raised. Although the dealing simply happens, the fair itself would not exist were it not for the hard work put into it by the people of Ballinasloe. It is the biggest and the best fair in Europe because they are determined it will be. Between the end of one year and the start of the next they will have to find sponsors, write and print a programme, arrange competitions, as well as getting on with their ordinary jobs. The fair is a tribute to them, and to their love of the horse. For two hundred and seventy years the fair has been a focal point for horse-selling in Ireland, and the people who organise it want it to stay that way. The money it brings to the town, and to Ireland, is vital for the economy.

The train from Dublin's Heuston station to Ballinasloe passes through a rich green landscape full of cattle and sheep and horses. Some of the horses are Thoroughbreds, most are half-breds. The fields are green as far as the eye can see and the grass is so rich it could feed twice as many animals without any difficulty. On the edge of towns such as Portarlington and Tullamore there are travellers' sites with the 'black and white' horses grazing nearby. The horses pick at the grass on the verges, clothes are spread over bushes to dry. The travellers and their horses stop for a while to draw breath. How many of these horses once passed through the 'Great Fair'? How many of these 'black and whites', half-breds and Irish Draughts once stood as foals or yearlings on the Fair Green? What would they have to say about the October Fair if they could speak? It would be interesting to know.

One of Ireland's great surviving traditions celebrated in words and pictures

The Ballinasloe October horse fair is famous the world over. This is the place to come to see the best of Irish bloodstock – and that means the best you will find anywhere.

The Great Fair brings to life a unique event. For a few days each year a quiet Co. Galway town becomes a maelstrom of wheeling and dealing, of bustle and throng, of songs and stories, as more than three hundred years of tradition and a thousand years of history meet head-on in Europe's greatest frenzy of horse-dealing.

Here, on a field the size of several rugby pitches, you will find a sea of horses in their hundreds – Irish Draught mares and foals, hunters, a few thoroughbreds, Connemara and Shetland ponies, and the distinctive piebald gypsy horses, prized for their trotting speed and skill. Among them jostle farmers and dealers, men with craggy, weather-worn faces, who have been coming to Ballinasloe all their lives. Hundreds of thousands of pounds change hands, and the horses that are sold may travel as far as America or Eu

With a wealth of specially taken photographs, *The Great Fair* cel the history, drama and excitement, the dealing and the night life tha up Ballinasloe at fair time. And above all it pays tribute to the hor every shape and size, that continue to draw people to the fair from quarter of the globe.

'Does the October event full justice.' ***Books Ireland***

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